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TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

Edited by BURT L. STANDISH

BETTER THINGS TO COME

TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

Well, boys, by the time this number of TOP-NOTCH reaches your hands, you will begin to realize that we are very much in earnest in our endeavor to make the TOP-NOTCH the foremost juvenile magazine in the United States. It is not always easy to make a publication for boys that will strike them just right. No publisher, however experienced, is better qualified to know the truth of this than we are. For over twenty years we have catered to the wants of youthful readers, and the mere success of our great publishing house is, in itself, the best indication of the class of matter that we have published.

We have permitted nothing tawdry or cheap to go into TOP-NOTCH and we never will. The past few numbers were really worth while, but the succeeding numbers will be very much better. We do not intend to stand still. Our watchword is "Onward, ever Onward." If you will take the present number of TOP-NOTCH and compare it with the first number, you will see just how hard we have been working to get the right kind of stories.

If we did not want to spoil the pleasure of your anticipation of the good things to come, we would tell you a few things about the authors who we have engaged to write for TOP-NOTCH hereafter.

The June number is bound to keep every one of its readers on the jump while he is going through its pages. The long, complete story is entitled, "Fighting Bob, of Princeton," and was written by that clever author, Edwin Larkmore, with whose work all Top-Notchers are thoroughly familiar.

There is a splendid story of baseball by Jack Gordon, in which fear, pluck and cleverness are interwoven to such an extent that no boy reader can let go until he has finished reading it and has settled to his own satisfaction as to how the lad, who is the principal character in it, disposes of the superstitions that got the better of him for a time. Boys, it is a corker, and if you miss it, you will miss a treat.

Then, "Towhead Murchison" comes along. "Towhead" is a very funny fellow with a lot of bright ideas, who makes you laugh at what ought to have been a very serious adventure. If you have ever read Morgan Robertson's "Sinful Peck," you will know just how good this story is when we say that, in its way, it is as good, if not better, than the story that made Mr. Robertson famous.

A new contributor, John D. Emerson, has given us a clever tale of preparatory school life in "The Climbers." It is really a masterpiece which teems with interest and is bound to linger in the memory of every one of our readers.

Each installment sees the interest in "The Deadwood Trail" augmented, and the chapters that make their appearance in the June number are really the most fascinating part of the story. Gilbert Patten is a great author. "The Deadwood Trail" proves it.

If you know of any author that you would like to see represented in the TOP-NOTCH, let us hear from you. The best is not one bit too good for Top-Notchers, and we mean to give it to them if it comes within the reach of our pocketbook.

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OUR AIM: THE LIVELIEST, CLEANEST AND BEST STORIES

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FIGHTING BOB OF PRINCETON

By EDWIN LARKMORE

Author of "Bob Halliday, Freshman."

In this story you will almost seem to hear the bay of hounds and the crack of the deer hunter's rifle; in fancy you will see the jack light shine at night and glimpse the fleeing buck in the shadowy aisles of a Louisiana forest. Big Bob Halliday, his chum, little Billy Frazer, and that arch scoundrel, Dr. Dodd, all make their reappearance. A yarn worth reading!

[LONG STORY, COMPLETE IN TEN CHAPTERS]

CHAPTER I.

AN INTERRUPTED LETTER.

Billy Frazer hated letter writing, but if you had peeped over his shoulder, as he sat in his room in a New Orleans hotel, and had seen the pen travel swiftly over the paper, you would have surmised that the young Princetonian—who was visiting the Crescent City with his chum, Bob Halliday, for the second time—was enjoying the task for once in his life.

"I don't hardly need to tell you, cousin mine," he wrote, "that Bob Halliday and I are spending the Christmas vacation in New Orleans. The newspaper men have been spreading the glad, good news, and have been raking up the old story of Bob's achievements when we were in this burg last summer—how he ran to earth a double-dyed scoundrel, who had been sailing under false colors in the Crescent City Eagles Athletic Club; and then turned the limelight on an undesirable citizen known as Doctor Dodd, who promptly took to the tall timber and hasn't been heard from since.

"There's a great big whoop for this strong-muscled chum of mine. But he deserves it all. I tell you, Cousin Miriam, Bob Halliday is all right. Some day you'll meet him, and then I expect *you* to do the enthusing——"

There Billy stopped—not for lack of news; he had enough to fill a dozen pages. But the door had opened suddenly, and Bob Halliday himself, tragically altered in appearance, stood on the threshold.

Billy's pen dropped on the note paper and rolled merrily over his writing, leaving large black splotches to mark its progress. His under jaw fell, and he sank back in his chair with a gasp.

No wonder Billy was surprised. Instead of the spruce, well-groomed Bob Halliday he knew so well, he saw a very much battered replica of his chum, with coat sleeve ripped from wrist to elbow, his collar in shreds, his hat shapeless, his clothes mud-bespattered, and his left hand bound in a handkerchief.

"For Heaven's sake, what's happened?" cried Billy Frazer.

"Take it easy, old man," said the big Princeton lad, making a bee line for a Morris chair and dropping into it with a huge sigh of relief. "I've had excitement enough for the last half hour, and I came here to rest up. I've been having a scrap with Jack Johnson."

"What?"

"Well, with a gentleman of his color and something of the same build. What are you doing, Billy?"

"Never mind what I am doing," Billy retorted. "What's happened? That's what I want to know?"

"I insist," said Bob quietly.

"Oh, thunder! Bob, you're the most provoking dog in the world. Well, I'm writing to Miriam—my cousin up-State, you know. I want you to meet her—but not looking as you are now! For the third time, what's happened?"

"Nothing much, Billy. It isn't worth telling."

"This time *I* insist."

Bob laughed.

"It's easily told. A crowd on a Canal Street car. A big, burly negro, dressed to kill, blocking the platform. A pretty little Creole trying to squirm her way in.

"White trash aren't supposed to butt in among colored folks, Billy, but, not knowing the rules of the game, I butted in, and told the big black fellow to move aside.

"He sassed me in the most beautiful English you ever heard. It 'most took my breath away; but—that girl was bound to get in if I knew anything.

"I just slammed my hundred and seventy pounds of solid stuff into the gentleman's waistcoat—and the girl got aboard. That big negro was sure mad. Quite right, too, Billy. But I only laughed and turned my back on him. That's where I made a mistake.

"Suddenly he grabbed me by the collar, and, with a quick jerk, threw me off the car. Unfortunately for him, I dropped on my feet instead of on my

head, and in just about thirty-four seconds I was back on the car. It was my time to be mad, Billy; and I was mad enough to have tackled the champion himself. I flung myself impetuously on the dressy darky and made a touchdown with him on the road.

"These New Orleans streets aren't the softest place in the world for a catch-as-catch-can scrap; and when you add to it the fact that we've been having a big rainstorm, you will understand why my clothes are ruined.

"The negro's swell hat was in the dirt by now, and he wasn't looking quite the gay sport he had been on the car. Incidentally, I hadn't much to boast about myself, in the way of dressiness.

"But just then neither of us were thinking about appearances. When I wriggled out of his affectionate embrace and climbed to my feet, I made a little speech, very short, and I guess not very sweet, about the demeanor of certain educated blacks who lose all sense of decency after they get an edcation.

"While he was getting his breath, I told him that Bob Halliday of Princeton wouldn't be doing his duty by closing his eyes to incivility or boorishness; and added the good old tradition pounded into us by the festive seniors, that a Princeton man stands up for women of all sorts at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances.

"In the middle of my sermon he came at me so hard he made my teeth rattle. But I wasn't asleep, Billy, and I got back at him with a whizzer that kissed his right eye. Then Mr. Negro went clean crazy. With that eye of his going to by-bye he hurled his big body at me like a battering-ram. I side-stepped. It was no time to be nice, Billy. I swung a right jab into his ribs with all the force I could command.

"It took the breath from him. He straightened up for a minute, and his head dropped forward. Then in went this little old left hand of mine and landed just where the chin meets the neck, and down went McGinty—down and out, Billy."

"Bob! Bob! Bob!" cried Billy Frazer. "You're the best-natured fellow in the world; nevertheless, you seem to take unholy joy in a fat and juicy scrap. Shame on you! Fie! fie! If you don't behave, I'll ship you back to Princeton. Better call up the doctor and see to that hand of yours right away."

"Nonsense, Billy. A basin of hot water and a little peroxide, and I'll be all right. I fight shy of doctors after our little escapade with Doctor Dodd last summer."

"You busted up poor old Dodd's sanitarium, all right," said Billy, laughing. "And from what I can hear, the doctor hasn't reported since."

"No, I guess he will stay lost for keeps."

"By the way, Spencer of the Crescent City Eagles has been here," said Billy, following Bob Halliday into the bathroom and sitting on the side of the tub while the big fellow held his hand under the hot-water spigot. "They have planned a big time banquet for to-night, and you're to be the king pin."

"Say, Billy, just you run along and tell them that I am indisposed. That's the polite word for the occasion, isn't it?"

"No, sirree!" cried Billy stoutly, with his hands clasped around his knees and his head bobbing a positive refusal. "You're coming along if I have to take you in an ambulance. This is where I get the chance of my life to make a speech, and I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"All right, Willie, dear," said Bob, grinning. "The little boy shall speak his little speech. Telephone them I'll be there on time."

Billy Frazer had referred casually to Doctor Dodd, of Dodd's sanitarium; but neither he nor Bob Halliday had the least idea that the notorious doctor was at that moment within a stone's throw of the hotel!

Dodd's sanitarium was an institution supposedly for the cure of the insane, but actually for the incarceration of perfectly sane persons, who, under the doctor's "treatment" speedily lost their reason.

Bob Halliday had exposed the place; and Dodd had fled from the State. That ought to have been the last of the rascally doctor, so far as the city of New Orleans was concerned.

And it probably would have been, if the Princeton lads hadn't gone South during the Christmas recess. But Doctor Dodd—hiding his identity under an alias in a town in Texas—caught sight of a newspaper paragraph announcing Bob's arrival in New Orleans; and as he read the laudatory comments on the famous Princetonian, black rage surged in his heart.

A wild desire for revenge overcame all regard for prudence, and he boarded a train for the Crescent City determined to take stern reprisals upon the youth who had put his "sanitarium" out of business.

At the moment when Bob was telling Billy Frazer of his encounter with the negro, Doctor Dodd was sitting on the end of a long pier, gazing out with eyes full of hate at the sluggish river.

Halfway down the pier a gang of longshoremen were noisily unloading a cargo of bricks from a steamer. But the end of the pier, where the doctor sat, was deserted, and he was free to pursue his musings undisturbed.

"I'll get even with that bantam now," he hissed; "and nothing will give me so much pleasure as revenge."

He caught up his broad-brimmed hat from the pier, where he had thrown it, and, pressing it down over his brow, started back uptown.

Half an hour later Doctor Dodd was climbing the steps of a gayly painted frame house, whose gaudy decorations were strangely in contrast with the quiet, black-lettered sign on the door, which read:

PROFESSOR ALAMO MALOLO,
Clairvoyant.

Dodd pushed the electric button three times and waited impatiently.

Finally the door was opened cautiously, and a negro in uniform appeared in the entrance.

The doctor shoved him aside roughly, and pushed into the house.

"Three rings, Cato!" he said irascibly. "That means *me!* Have you forgotten it?"

"Ah's mos' outrajous glad to see you, doctah," drawled the negro. "But it's been so long since you've been heah, I done forgot. Besides, Ah done be 'tendin' Perfessah Malolo."

"Huh! More likely you've been asleep," sneered Dodd. "Where's Malolo?"

Cato rolled his eyes and nodded in the direction of a door before which hung a crimson curtain. Near by, on a stand, a red lamp was burning.

The hall was strangely ornamented with curious swords and spears, shields and lances, and various warlike gear, plainly of native African manufacture. The wall paper was a network of crawling, snake-like and spidery forms.

"He's in there, is he?" asked Dodd, looking at the crimson curtain. "Well, you needn't bother to announce me. I'll go right in."

The negro laid a hand on the doctor's sleeve.

"'Scuse me, sah, but Ah got ordehs dat on no 'count is de perfessah to be disturbed."

"Why not? Another trout in his net, I suppose?"

"Boss, she's jes' de lubbliest critter you ebber laid yo' bohn sight upon," whispered the negro, rolling his eyes ecstatically.

"Well, Cato, you get in there quietly and whisper into his gentle ear that I want him to hustle things to oblige me. I'm in a hurry, and I want to have a quiet conversation with him right now—you understand?"

The negro nodded and slipped away.

CHAPTER II.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

Behind that red curtain was a large room, papered and ornamented as grewsomely and grotesquely as the hall with-

out, and fitted with all manner of appliances dear to the heart of a necromancer, including a great crystal globe.

In addition, in a low fireplace at one end a fire of red coals burned, and above this fire hung a sputtering black pot, suspended from an ancient iron rod.

On a rich rug before this fire squatted a herculean negro, with a face and body as black as ebony. The only clothing for the upper portion of his huge body was a leopard skin. Below that was a loin cloth, and a dress of soft tanned and ornamented leather. His feet were bare, as were also his legs to the knees. On his head he wore a green turban.

His eyes were closed, and he swung his muscular body to and fro with a weaving motion, while from his lips there came at times mutterings that were unintelligible, with now and then a few notes of a strange, wild chant, rising and falling, and occasionally filled with sudden savage passion.

On a low stool near him sat a young mulatto woman, richly dressed, with diamonds sparkling in her ears and on her fingers. Her eyes were fixed with strange fascination on his face. There was paint on her cheeks, giving them a rich red which was quite unnatural. Now and then she gasped, and pressed her ringed hands to her bosom.

On the paneling at the side of the fireplace a low knocking sounded. The young mulatto woman started, and glanced inquiringly in that direction.

The giant negro continued his chant and the weaving motions of his huge, black body.

The knocking sounded again. It was an eerie thing, and the woman, who was filled with superstitious awe, was ready to believe that Malolo had called up the spirits of the dead. But the black man seemed not to hear the tapping, and continued his incantations.

Cato came creeping back through the hall to where Doctor Dodd sat waiting.

He shook his head, and made a meaning gesture.

"I must wait, eh?" growled Dodd.

Meanwhile, behind the curtain, Malolo rose from the rug before the fire, and leaned over the pot. He stirred it with what looked like a huge bone. Then, with a long ladle, he poured the liquid slowly over a roughly fashioned ball of horse hair.

"The laws of this land do not permit me to exercise my rightful heritage as a high priest of Voodoo," he said in a dejected tone, and without a trace of negro dialect in his speech. "The ancient rites are forbidden me, and I have to adopt an amended form, which is often displeasing to the Great Shadow."

He looked keenly at the woman, and continued impressively:

"I warn you that this charm may fail; but come to me again, my sister, and we will try to placate the shades with a more worthy offering."

The woman looked at him with bright, frightened eyes, as he placed a snake-skin bag in her yellow hands, shivering when she touched it.

"Wear it next to your heart," said the high priest of Voodoo.

For an instant the ghost of a smile flitted over his countenance, and then Cato was summoned to escort the disciple to the door.

Cato took the opportunity to whisper: "Doctah Timothy Dodd is heah, sah; an' he's in a dreffful hurry, sah."

"Dodd! Poor old Dodd!" exclaimed Malolo. "Send him in, Cato."

"Yes, sah."

Cato led the beringed yellow woman out of the room and along the dimly lighted hall. Opening the outer door, he watched her hurry down the steps, clutching the "cha'm" given her by Professor Malolo.

Then he turned back to where Dodd was waiting; and throwing aside the heavy curtain, swung open the door behind it, ushering the doctor into the incantation den of the black necromancer.

In all New Orleans there was not a man better known or more feared by the negroes than Professor Malolo. To the white race, he was known by a few sickly sentimental women, who visited him surreptitiously to learn what the future had in store for them.

Doctor Timothy Dodd knew he was a faker, but he respected his very considerable talents, relied on his aid and friendship, and feared his great genius for evil.

There were not many men more evil than Doctor Dodd himself; yet in the world of cunning, cruelty and deception, he acknowledged one superior, and that was Malolo.

CHAPTER III.

THE BEAST.

Malolo stood, with feet apart, in the centre of the room, his knotted arms crossed over the leopard skin on his broad chest, and regarded Timothy Dodd with a strange smile.

"Poor old Dodd!" was his greeting. "I heard about the exposure of your sanitarium several months ago, and I thought you had left town."

"I did, but I'm back again," said Dodd. "I've been living under an assumed name in Texas, but a man can't build up a new reputation in a few months. My sanitarium is closed, and I am down and out."

"Just as I was a little while ago," retorted Malolo. "See this eye of mine! It would show black if I was a white man. Dodd, what do you think of a stripling who stands up to a giant like me and sends me to sleep with a punch under the chin?"

"Well, there's only one stripling I can think of who might do a thing like that; and he's the one who got into my sanitarium. I swear if I ever lay my hands on Halliday, I'll——"

"Halliday! Halliday!" roared Malolo, taking a stride forward, his eyes glowing. "What was this Halliday like?"

"Little more than a kid. A big, strong-muscled, clean-limbed young fellow, with a twinkling eye that would deceive Satan himself. It deceived me when he palmed himself off on me as a nervous wreck."

"That's the man!" cried Malolo. "Halliday—that's what he said: 'Remember Bob Halliday, of Princeton.'"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Dodd.

"I'm telling you that he's the fellow who knocked me down in the street. Think of it, Dodd! Set upon by this youngster—me, Malolo!"

It was Dodd's turn to grin now, but his evil face couldn't long retain a smile. He promptly set his teeth, and the lines of hate deepened around his mouth.

"That gives us common cause," he said with a satisfied grimace. "I want to get back at Halliday, and I know you'll help me now."

"Help you?" echoed Malolo. "I'll give up everything to teach that young upstart a lesson."

"I have a plan," said Dodd, after a pause.

And, as Malolo seated himself, the quack proceeded to set forth the details of as dastardly a scheme as ever scoundrel conceived.

"Bully!" cried Malolo finally, and rubbed his great hands together in anticipation. "You leave it to me. When we get him here——" He did not finish the sentence, but the look in both pairs of eyes spoke of a merciless reprisal.

The outer bell rang, and Timothy Dodd grew even paler than before.

"This way," whispered Malolo to Dodd, whistling the words through his sharpened teeth. He pressed his fingers against the side of the fireplace, and Dodd's eyes opened wide as he saw one of the great oak panels move slowly outward.

"It connects with two secret rooms upstairs," explained Malolo. "You'll be safe enough up there, even if the detectives get a hint that you are in New Orleans again. I'll send Cato to you after a time."

Timothy Dodd slipped through the hole, and discovering a stairway that led upward, began to grope his way toward the top of the stairs, finding himself presently in a room under the roof.

Here he looked about the room. In the dead silence he heard the sound of heavy breathing. It startled him, for he had thought himself alone in that

part of the house. There was a door on his right, connecting with an adjoining room. He put his ear against the keyhole of the door and stood listening.

The breathing ceased.

"Something singular about that," he said to himself, but, after a while, hearing nothing further, he began to wonder if his fancy or his fears had not tricked him.

"It may have been the wind, after all. I guess I'm getting nervous."

Presently he gave another start of surprise and alarm, for this time he heard a low shuffling, as if the occupant of that other room were moving about.

"Yes, there's a man in there, sure!" was his conclusion. He wondered if Malolo had not secreted some other fugitive in that part of the house.

To settle the matter, he crept down the stairs and reached the bottom. There were voices in the professor's studio, and Dodd waited until he heard Cato summoned to show the visitor out. Then he rapped softly.

"Well?" asked the big black, sliding the panel aside and thrusting his turbaned head in the opening. "What's troubling you now, Dodd?"

"There's a man in that other room up there," Dodd whispered. "I first heard him breathing, and then I heard him walking about."

Malolo's mouth extended in a broad grin, and he laughed boisterously.

"We'll see what it is," he said.

Squeezing his big body through the opening, he closed the panel, and led the way up the narrow stairs, Dodd following close behind him.

"In that room," Dodd whispered, when they had gained the upper story; and he pointed toward the door behind which he had heard the ominous sounds.

"Suppose we investigate," suggested Malolo good-naturedly. "It happens to be a dark room, so we'll take a light." He put a match to a candle on a nearby table; then, taking a key from a pocket in the leopard skin, he fitted it to the door.

Timothy Dodd stood well back in the passage, breathing hard with expectation.

When the door was flung open, Dodd could scarcely repress a yell of fear, for out of that room shambled a hairy creature that was half-man, half-beast.

Doctor Dodd started to retreat, but Malolo put a hand on his shoulder and laughed harshly.

"It's only Baku," he said; "the brightest gorilla in the world."

The fierce beast glared at the terrified Dodd.

Malolo patted the big brute and chuckled gleefully:

"As harmless as a kitten—to my friends," he explained. "Here, Baku; down, sir!"

The gorilla growled, but groveled before him.

Timothy Dodd ceased his efforts to escape, but retreated to the wall and stared at the beast.

"For goodness sake, Malolo, take that thing out of here! What do you call it? Not an orang-outang?"

"A young gorilla," said Malolo, with a horrid grin. "I forgot to tell you about Baku. He is harmless to my friends."

"And to your enemies?"

"Heaven help them, if Baku gets his grip on them; he would break a man's back like a pipestem. He'll not trouble you, now that he knows you are my friend."

Then he seized the big beast by the hair of the neck and hustled him back into the room, closing and locking the door on him.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN GOOD FELLOWS GET TOGETHER.

"Fellows," began Spencer, the president of the Crescent City Eagles, beaming down the long table spread in the billiard room of the famous New Orleans athletic association. "Fellows, why are we here?"

"We're here because we're here," chirrupted little Billy Frazer, from his seat beside Bob Halliday at the centre of the table.

A ripple of laughter followed the sally, and before Spencer could proceed with his oration the guests were chanting in chorus to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne":

"We're here because we're here because
We're here because we're he—ee—ere,
We're here because we're here because
We're here because we're here."

"Fellows, try to be serious," pleaded Spencer. "This is an auspicious occasion. I can't make much of a speech, but I want to convey the good wishes of this club to our guest of honor tonight, the fearless lad from Princeton, Bob Halliday. I need not——"

But he got no further. From the jovial spirits around the table went up shrieks of "'Ray for Bob Halliday!" "What's the matter with Princeton?" "Oh, you Robert!"

A young graduate from Tulane leaped to his feet, and, waving his arms, yelled:

"Fellows, a Princeton cheer for Halliday! Are you ready? Take your time from me:

"'Ray, 'ray, 'ray!
Tiger, tiger, tiger!
Sizz, sizz, sizz!
Boom, boom, boom!
Ah, ah, ah!
Halliday! Halliday! Halliday!"

"Now, then," shouted the Tulane man, "give him a locomotive. Ready?"

And they repeated the yell with enthusiasm.

"Speech! speech!" they cried. "Speech from Halliday! Sit down, Spencer! Halliday! Halliday!"

Spencer had prepared an oration over which he had spent many nerve-racking hours, and he was disposed to be angry; but his unfailing good humor asserted itself, and he sank back into his chair while Billy Frazer hoisted Bob to his feet.

"Thank you, fellows," said Bob, his eyes shining. "When I was in New Orleans last summer, I tell you I was mighty glad to find such a fraternal spirit here in the South; and I went back to Princeton feeling that there was no more North and South, but that we were just jolly good fellows the country over."

The phrase "jolly good fellows" caught the fancy of the club members, and as Bob resumed his seat they sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow" in a mighty chorus.

"Fellows, there's another Princeton man here," said Spencer, when the din had subsided. "I mean Mr. Frazer."

"Frazer! 'Ray for Frazer!" they shouted. And the Tulane man was on his feet again calling for a "locomotive."

Billy was in no way unnerved, and while the yell was being given he shouted in Bob's ear:

"You did pretty good, old man; but this is where I get my chance to tell some funny stories. You're a peach on the gridiron or the diamond, but you're not in it with me as an orator. Keep your ears open and you'll learn how to enthrall the mob, son."

There were calls for a speech, and Billy Frazer rose and spread his hands on the table after the fashion of the experienced after-dinner speaker. He waited for a moment, and then—suddenly out went the lights.

There was a wild yell of laughter, and Billy, leaning back to where the big freshman ought to have been, said:

"Guess they don't like speeches, after all, Bob. What do you say? Shall I give it to 'em in the dark?"

No answer from Bob Halliday.

"How about it, old man?" He put out a hand and groped for Bob's shoulder. He touched nothing but air. Sitting down, he did some more groping.

"Say, Bob, where the deuce are you?" he shouted.

His hand at last encountered Bob's chair; but it was upturned on the floor.

Some one struck a match, and by its glare Billy looked for his chum—looked in vain. Bob Halliday had vanished.

Bob had been leaning back in his chair, preparing to enjoy Billy Frazer's humor, when the lights went out. Simultaneously he felt two pairs of arms encircle him. A hand was pressed around

his windpipe. Something fell with a crash on his head—then came unconsciousness.

He awoke, not suddenly, not with a start, but gradually. The throbbing pain in his head brought the scene most vividly before his mind.

Without intending to take any precautions, he very carefully and very slowly opened his eyes.

He found himself in a cab that was rolling rapidly over the cobbles. Opposite him sat two well-dressed men in evening suits; but something that Bob saw in the dim light of the cab sent the blood with a rush to his face.

Each of the men held a pistol on his knee.

At that moment the men were not bothering about him. They had not even taken the trouble to bind his hands. That crack on the head was deemed sufficient to keep the Princeton lad quiet for a long time.

And it would have been, if Bob's head had not been seasoned by many a hard thump on the Princeton athletic field.

The men were conversing in undertones, but loudly enough for Bob to catch the words.

"Huh! A hundred is a pretty measly sum for a job like this," one of them was saying.

"Oh, quit your kickin'," was the other's retort. "A hundred down when we hand over our man is better than five hundred promises. And I've never known his nibs to fail yet in producing the stuff."

Bob was not greatly interested in the conversation, though he would have given a good deal to know who "his nibs" was. He was much more interested in his own safety; and the proximity of the two men gave him a sudden idea.

He took a deep breath, quietly worked the muscles of his arms, then flung himself at his captors.

With unerring accuracy, each of his hands met a cheek, and exerting all his strength, he brought the two heads together with a terrific crash.

With a lightning turn, he slammed his shoulder against the door. It was locked, of course, but the man who had bucked the line time and again went through the door as if it had been made of pasteboard.

In a moment he was on the street and running for his life.

He had no mind to try conclusions with the two men when they recovered and realized what had happened. Two armed men, with the probable assistance of the cab driver, were too great odds for Bob to tackle single-handed and unarmed. In the present circumstances he deemed discretion the better part of valor, and he felt no shame at running away.

He reached the hotel before Billy Frazer, and was under the blankets when his chum came in.

When Billy switched on the lights he exploded in a storm of objurgations.

"Bob—you here! Now, what—— Oh, hang it, Bob, I'm the most disgusted fellow in New Orleans!"

"What's biting you, Billy?" came from the bed.

"Where have you been?" Billy demanded. "I've been scouting the town for you, and the club boys are on fire with all sorts of theories about your abduction—and here you are safe in bed! I guess Spencer was right. He suggested it was some joke of yours, engineered with the help of the waiters. Oh, you make me sick!"

"Billy, the club theories aren't so very far wrong," said Bob seriously. "But we'll adopt Spencer's explanation for publication. Listen, here's the story."

Then he told Billy of his abduction and of his encounter in the cab with the two men.

"But, see here, Billy. Don't say a word about this. Do you hear?" he concluded.

"But what will the fellows think?"

"Oh, they'll put it down to a practical joke, as Spencer suggests. You can blame it on my bashfulness."

Billy shook his head doubtfully.

"The police ought to know about it," he declared.

"No, Billy. We'll investigate the matter for ourselves. It isn't big enough for a police inquiry, and I don't want the fellows to think I was a coward."

"But what do you make of it, Bob?"

"Don't know. But I'll stake my diploma we'll round up the man who engineered the abduction. And I might make a shrewd guess and say that we'll find he's a chap with four letters in his name."

"D-o-d-d," Billy spelled out.

And Bob nodded.

To Spencer alone Bob told the real story of his disappearance from the banquet. The other club members took it as Spencer had suggested—an excellent piece of fun. And they added many laughable details when reporting the occurence to their friends.

Spencer was much worried, and he and Bob talked the matter over for several hours.

"Well," said Spencer finally, "you'll have to be careful, Bob. Meanwhile, if you can take your mind off the thing for a minute or two, I want to tell you something I meant to spring on you in my speech at the banquet."

"What is it?"

"Well, the fellows want to show you as good a time as they can while you are in New Orleans, and they have planned a hunting trip for you. The deer are not very big in the Louisiana lowlands, but they make up for it in nimbleness, and I think I can promise you fine sport. What do you say to a day or two on the runways?"

Bob was not very keen about gunning, but the "day or two on the runways" appealed to him, and he was grateful to the Eagles for their thoughtfulness. He gave his promise to be on hand, and Spencer went off to complete arrangements.

CHAPTER V.

WOLF IN NAME AND NATURE.

Bob was glad enough to leave New Orleans, which had been a little too exciting, even for him, and to get away to the quiet of the lowlands for a few days.

Arrived at the camping grounds, Spencer was eager to exhibit the kennels to Bob Halliday.

"If there is one thing we're proud of," said Spencer, "it's the dogs. We think we have the pick of the Southern hounds."

They were indeed a fine lot, of the best blood in the South. In looking them over and descanting on their good qualities, Spencer pointed out one of the negroes who had charge of them, at the same time informing Bob that this darky had been chosen as his attendant.

"Come here, Ben!" said Spencer, summoning the black indicated, and smiling when the negro shuffled forward, hat in hand, with a low bow that seemed to indicate the acme of meekness and trustworthiness.

The negro was a big fellow, with powerful limbs and shoulders.

"Ben, this is Mr. Halliday," said Captain Spencer. "He and his friend, Mr. Frazer, are the guests of our party on this trip, and I'm going to trust you to look after them and see that they get all the chances that are coming to them in the way of sport. We want them to have the time of their lives while they are with us, understand?"

Ben bobbed his head vigorously.

"Yas, sah!" he said. "Ah's ready to serve dese yeah gem'men, sah."

"You had a look over the hunting grounds yesterday, Ben?"

"Ah shuah did, sah."

"We'll have some good hunting, don't you think?"

"It'll be fine, sah, in mah 'pinion. Me an' Sam done gone down to'ads dat bayou yist'day aft'noon, soon as we done git heah, an' we foun' deer sign a-plenty. Dem canebrakes an' willer scrub along de ribber am full ob sign, sah; and off in de ma'shes an' in de swamps dey was mo' sign. Yas, sah, de huntin's gwine to be pow'ful good, in mah 'pinion."

"And the dogs are all right, Ben?"

"Fines' in de worl', sah."

He rolled his eyes toward the hounds that were now frisking round the group.

"Dat yeah Wolf"—he pointed to a big

gaunt hound which was tearing viciously at a bone—"ef he strike er trail he ain' nevah gwine to leave it, sah. He hang to it lack a 'possum to a 'simmon tree limb, sah."

"You're to keep close to Mr. Halliday, Ben," Spencer directed. "So that you'll be near to help him in any way he wishes. You'll pull the boat for him when we go jack-light hunting, and you'll be given charge of his outfit. Take the dogs away now."

The black called the dogs about him and led them away.

"That dog Ben calls Wolf looks dangerous," said Bob thoughtfully; "and I'd want a mighty good testimonial as to his character before I made a special friend of him."

"Testimonials have gone out of style, Bob. I took the dog on its merits; just as I took Ben."

"Didn't the darky bring you any references?"

"No. He had heard that we were organizing a hunt, and he applied for a position. But I think you'll find that you've got a valuable aide."

Bob had no occasion to doubt the accuracy of Captain Spencer's judgment that day.

Ben was always near when needed, and away when he was not wanted. He cleaned the guns, built fires, anticipated wishes, and made himself as useful as Bob could wish.

Billy Frazer was especially delighted with him.

When the hunting began, Ben was given full charge of the dogs. He had already been attending to them closely, but now he had assistants.

Wolf was sick that morning, which seemed to worry Ben a good deal.

"Dis yeah Wolf done got away f'um me dat fust day we was heah," he explained, "and dat's what's de matter wid him. He struck a trail an' wouldn't come back nohow. Ah called him. De trouble wif Wolf am dat he been kep' too clost in de city, an' w'en he's turned out heah it's pow'ful ha'd to keep him down. He's jest so plumb full ob life dat he'll rún like a lokymotuv; dat's what, boss. An' den he jes' goes an' fills hisself full ob swamp wateh. 'Course he gets sick. Dat's what's hurtin' Wolf. Doan' you worry, sah, he'll be all right soon."

Spencer shook his head dubiously.

"Better leave him in the kennels today," he said. "I'll be just as well satisfied if he doesn't join the hunt. He's got too much of the wolf about him for my peace of mind, anyway. You leave him here."

"Yas, sah; I'll do it."

But when the hunting party had driven to the section where they were to begin the hunt, it was found that Wolf had joined the pack.

"He done break away, sah," Ben explained. "Ah chain him to de kennel, sah, and Ah doan't know how Wolf done it; but heah dat blessed dog is. Now whut Ah gwine tuh do?"

The party spent half a day following fruitless scents, but finally a fresh trail was struck; and the dogs went bellowing and booming off through the woods, hot on the scent.

Bob Halliday and Billy Frazer were stationed at runways, near together, the distance separating them being but one or two hundred yards.

Ben had announced that, in his examination of the hunting grounds, the deer he had started had come out that day at the runways now watched by the Princetonians; hence Spencer and the other members of the Eagles taking part in the hunt, insisted that Bob Halliday and Billy Frazer should stand near those openings. With fine Southern hospitality they desired their guests to have the best chances that might come.

There was a decaying tree stump at a distance of some fifty yards from the edge of the swamp, and here Bob took his stand, gun in hand, listening to the musical notes of the hounds, which now rose and fell on the quiet air.

The baying sounded nearer, seemingly coming from the heart of the low, bush-grown, swampy land that, at this point, stretched away for a long distance.

With a quickening pulse Bob fixed his eyes on the bushes.

Suddenly there was a flash of tan, on which the sunlight glinted for a moment. Bob had no time to take aim, but he sent a shot in the direction of the streak of light.

The deer, unharmed, fled on, turning again to the swamp.

"Better luck next time," Bob commented philosophically.

The sounds of the dogs died away, but Bob retained his position on the stump, gun in readiness. In the dead silence he heard a crackling of the branches to his right, which caused him to swing his weapon to his shoulder. Very cautiously a long gray nose was thrust out on the runway, and a keen pair of eyes gazed inquisitively at the stump.

Bob's gun spoke on the instant, and a big buck tumbled headlong almost at his feet. It was one of the largest that had been shot in the lowlands that season, and Billy sent up a yell of victory.

Ben was the first on the scene to offer congratulations.

"Dat am de fines' deer Ah ebber seed, boss," he cried delightedly. "De fines' ebber!" And in his exuberance of glee he gave Bob a mighty hug. Then he stepped back, full of apologies.

"Ah shuah done forgit mase'f, boss," he stammered. "Ah was so taken up wif——"

"That's all right, Ben," said Bob, laughing; and then he turned suddenly, and saw Wolf, the ferocious hound which Ben had added to the pack, come loping through the opening, eyes aflame, snarling viciously. Its hair was ridged stiffly along its back, and its lips were drawn back, showing two rows of the most formidable teeth Bob had ever seen.

Halliday had a premonition of danger, for, despite Ben's protests, he suspected the viciousness of the brute.

He had no time to think whether the animal was mad. He was only conscious that danger menaced him.

For a moment the big hound crouched; then, with a long-drawn howl that sounded like a cry of pain, he leaped straight at Bob.

It was a prodigious leap, and Bob's shot, which had been aimed straight into the yawning jaws, checked the maddened animal, and Wolf rolled in the dust of the runway, dead.

Billy Frazer, hearing the shot, hastened to the spot, and stopped aghast at the sight of the dead hound, at which Bob was gazing with a puzzled expression from a seat on the stump of the tree.

"What's up? Did he attack you?" cried Billy.

Bob nodded.

"I knew he was a vicious brute," he said, "but I cannot understand his attack on me, at that."

"Where did that nigger get to?" asked Billy Frazer suddenly.

"Guess he's scared to death, Billy. Hey, there, Ben!" Bob's voice rose to a shout.

"Ah's a-comin'." The response, uttered in a shaking falsetto, and sounding most unlike the burly negro, came from the dense undergrowth, and presently Ben shuffled timidly out from his shelter.

The whites of his eyes gleamed, and his face had a certain venomous look, which was quickly changed to one of commiseration as he came up.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake!" he cried, gazing awe-stricken at the dead hound.

"That pet dog of yours is dead," said Billy Frazer. "Good riddance, too, if you ask me."

"Daid! Wolf daid!" cried the negro, dropping down beside the body of the hound.

The black's mouth gaped open, showing his teeth. A look that was half admiration of these young fellows, and half fear, flitted across his black face and was gone as soon as it came.

"He's daid, all right!" wailed Ben, scrambling up from his knees. "Daid! Sho' nuff! Boss, dat yeah dog war de fines' dog I ebber seed. An' dere warn't nothin' de matter wif him. 'Deed dere waren't."

"Forget the dog, Ben, and tell me

where this confounded stench comes from," interrupted Bob, becoming conscious of a nauseating odor.

"Seems to me it's right under our noses," said Billy Frazer, sniffing. "Phew! Great Scott, Bob, your coat smells like an apothecary's shop."

"My coat!" Bob had it off in a trice, and was holding it at arm's length, peering keenly at a dark stain traced from the collar to the waist line. "That's it. Woof! Here, Ben, what do you make of it?" And he flung the coat at the negro.

"Dat's f'um one ob dese heah trees, sah," said the negro promptly. "Some ob dem has de mos' almighty lamsquashus smell; dey shuah has."

"Well, Ben, if you've any mercy in your soul, hunt up a stream and try to rid my coat of the odor."

"Shuah, sah, I get dat yeah stream right away." And he was off through the trees with a whoop.

"There's a cheerful idiot for you!" cried Billy Frazer, laughing, as the huge negro bounded along.

But Billy would have changed his opinion about the cheerfulness of Ben if he had seen the look of hate that settled over the fellow's black face when he had gone a few yards. His eyes glittered wickedly, and his great hands gripped the coat as if he would tear it to pieces.

"Ben's cheerful enough," said Bob Halliday; "but there isn't much of the idiot about him. There's a certain shrewdness about that fellow which makes me think he's a lot deeper than that vacant grin of his would suggest."

But Billy Frazer pooh-poohed the idea, and, dismissing it from his mind, walked across to examine the big buck which Bob had brought down with his gun.

"It's a stunner, old man," he cried. "When we get this head to Princeton the fellows will lionize you for sure."

At this moment Ben reappeared with Bob's coat.

"Well, Ben, how did you make out?" Bob asked, as the big negro came forward.

"Ah found dat creek, all right, sah," said Ben. "An' Ah done scrub dis yeah coat till it look like it war new. Dat smell am smiflicated now for shuah."

"Ben, you know a good deal about dogs," began Bob, after a pause. "Do you think that smell could have set Wolf crazy?"

For a moment the eyes of the big negro narrowed to mere slits, and the pupils became two points of fire.

"'Deed—Ah—doan'—know," he said slowly, lowering his gaze. "Dat yeah Wolf he done be ailin', an' maybe——"

"Have you ever known a thing like that to occur before?" Bob asked.

"No, boss, Ah cain't say as Ah has."

"Well, it's mighty queer. But the coat's all right now, and we'll look out for smells in future. See that you look carefully to the other dogs."

When Spencer and the others joined the Princetonians they heard the story of Wolf's attack with blanched faces; but the dead buck which Bob had brought down with his gun lessened the tension, and he and Billy had to listen to many wild and wonderful stories which, if they had been strictly true, would have warranted the Eagles being classed among the mighty hunters of history.

There was a young New Orleans doctor with the hunting party. He was a member of the Eagles, and had joined the company both for the pleasure of the trip, and that they might have a physician with them in case of a hunting accident.

Bob Halliday told his story to this doctor, and asked him to examine the dead hound.

Spencer and some of the other members of the club, as well as Halliday and Frazer, were with the doctor when the examination was made.

To Bob's relief, the young doctor declared that the hound had not been suffering from rabies, and that this terrible malady afflicted none of the other dogs.

He said that Wolf's ferocity had been caused partly by the heated state produced by the run after the deer, aggravated by his precious sickness, and partly also by the smell—which, however, remained a mystery.

He had found traces of a poisonous irritant in the dog's body, but could offer no guess as to the nature of the irritant or how it had come there. At all events, it was not rabies.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN THE JACK-LIGHT SHINES.

It was an ideal night for hunting deer by jack-light. There was no moon, and even the stars were shrouded by a filmy curtain of cloud.

Light, flat-bottomed skiffs, or bateaus, were in readiness on the near-by river, some of them fitted with portable cressets, or fire-pans, some with bull's-eye lanterns.

Seated that night in one of the bateaus, with his gun across his knees, a torch at the bow, and the negro, Ben, working the oars with a silence that was admirable, Bob Halliday floated out on the dull and muddy river.

The care of the dogs had been given into the hands of other negroes; and Ben had been sent by Spencer to pull this boat and guide Bob to the most promising places.

Jack-light hunting requires absolute silence; but even before leaving camp, Ben had been unsually quiet. Apparently the death of the hound had depressed him.

"I can't blame him for feeling bad about Wolf," was Bob's thought.

Then he recalled the strange look which had been in Ben's face when he ran toward the dead hound, and of which he had spoken to Billy Frazer.

"That fairly made him hate me, I guess," was Bob's further conclusion.

In spite of this, he had no fear of the big negro, who now crouched in the boat, pulling so silently.

Ben's black eyes were fixed on the timber-fringed shores, which rose dark and sombre near by. Along these shores were certain places where deer might be expected to come down to drink. Or they might be found standing in the water close to the land.

The sight of that strange light floating silently on the water would naturally attract their attention and excite their curiosity. On turning their heads toward it, for the prolonged stare which a deer makes in such a case, the light of the torch would be reflected from their eyes, which would seem to be two balls of fire glowing in the darkness, while the body of the deer possibly could not be discerned at all.

It is then that the hunter shoots, aiming for the head between those luminous points of light which he knows are the deer's eyes.

Bob Halliday's was not the only boat out on the river and the bayous that night. Billy Frazer was out there somewhere, with a negro accompanying him; and so was Spencer, and nearly every other member of the party. Only the extra negro servants and the dogs had been left behind.

The stillness of the night was broken at intervals by the leap of a fish, the cry of a bird, the hoot of an owl in the woods, the far-off call of some wild animal, and by the gurgling of the water against the banks or tree roots.

The river was full of snags; and tree trunks lay here and there in the water, sometimes with their roots still attached to the shore. In addition, there were occasional sand bars, though generally the banks were low and muddy, without any indication of sand.

The mystery of the Southern night lay over everything, with only those sounds of the woods and water breaking the silence.

How far away was the rush and roar of the cities! Even New Orleans, which they had left so recently, and which was not so distant but that a few hours on the train would carry them back to it, seemed part of life on another planet.

When one is thus in the wilderness, in touch with nature, the littleness of the things that usually occupy his time and energy is impressed upon him. And even Bob Halliday, with his exuberance of spirits, became thoughtful and rem-

iniscent. That little boat, with its two occupants, and the light flashing from the bow, seemed to him a picture of his own life—facing the unknown future, pressing forward, unaware of what snags might be ahead.

Bob's reveries were broken suddenly by a threshing of the water in front of him, followed by a popping of the brush along the nearest bank.

The rower gave a backward sweep of his oars.

"A deer, boss!" he whispered. "But he's gone!"

"We didn't shine his eyes," said Bob, aroused and sitting more erect, with the gun in his hands.

"No, boss; Ah reckons dat little bend hid him; and he done got skeered an' lope away."

He seemed genuinely grieved that Bob had not been able to secure a shot at the deer.

"Let him go, Ben. I wasn't paying close enough attention. In fact, I was thinking."

"What yo' finkin' 'bout, boss?" There seemed a tone of anxiety in the question. "W'en a gemman is jack-light huntin' ain' no time fer finkin' ob anything but de deer."

"That's true," said Bob. "I'll try to keep wide awake, Ben."

Bob had not answered the negro's query as to what he was thinking about; and Ben, in shifting his oars for the purpose of again pulling on, glanced sharply at him.

Bob saw the look, but mistook its meaning; he fancied it was a glance of surprise, and perhaps even contempt, because he had been "thinking" instead of attending to the business in hand.

Hardly had the big negro bent to the oars again, when a spark of fire split the darkness on the right bank, and a bullet from a rifle plowed into the skiff, the report of the gun sounding at the same instant.

Ben dropped his oars with a yell, and clapped a hand to his arm.

CHAPTER VII.

WHERE BEN'S TRAIL LED.

"Took me foh a deer!" roared Ben, with unwonted excitement in his tone. "Dat bullet gone spang frough dis ahm, Ah reckons."

Bob caught up the oars which Ben had dropped.

A rustling was heard in the undergrowth whence the shot had come; then another shot sounded, the bullet passing close to the torch.

"You're shooting at men, you lunatic!" shouted Bob, thinking that the rifleman must be a member of his own party, but at the same time wondering for what reason he was on the shore and not in a boat, and why, if he was not crazy, he should shoot at a jack-light.

He ran the boat to the land, while Ben, hoarse growls rumbling from his throat, sat with his hand held to his injured arm.

"Gimme dat oar!" said the negro. "Ah's gwine kill dat man!"

Bob followed him out of the boat.

"Better let me look at your arm," he urged. "I wonder who it was shot at us, and what has become of him?"

Ben slipped up his ragged sleeve, as Bob Halliday took a turn of the painter round a snag on the shore.

Bob stared into the darkness, where the rifleman was hidden. Then he stooped forward to look at Ben's arm by the light of the flaming jack-light.

As he did so the negro's arm shot out and encircled Bob's neck. It was as if the black had suddenly gone insane from the pain of his wound and now sought to assault the man who would aid him.

That was Fighting Bob Halliday's thought—that the pain of the wound and the stirring of anger had suddenly made a crazy savage of this giant black; and, not caring to have that hooked arm close tightly round his neck, his heavy right fist smashed like a battering-ram into Ben's face, knocking him backward and breaking his hold.

With a wild howl, the negro leaped up and came at him again.

"Stand back, you fool!" yelled Bob.

He side-stepped, and escaped the negro's lunge; but when the black closed in once more, leaping and roaring like a madman, Bob again knocked him down.

As he fell the negro tried to get the rifle which Bob had dropped.

With a quick spring, the fighting Princetonian kicked it out of his way; and before Ben could get up from the ground Bob had the weapon cocked and leveled at him.

"Come at me again and you're a dead man!" Bob threatened; not that he really meant to kill the negro, but in the hope of scaring him, and so bringing him back to his senses.

Ben stared, his mouth falling open and showing his teeth.

Then, with a grunt of baffled hate and rage, he turned about abruptly and plunged into the woods, being screened quickly by the undergrowth along the river.

"I'd like to know where I've seen that nigger before," muttered Bob. "When he drops that everlasting smile his face seems very familiar to me—but I can't place him."

The heavy running of the negro's feet drew off into the woods, in spite of Bob's stern command to return; and the Princeton lad was left alone in the darkness.

His natural thought was that a sudden madness had overmastered the usually good-natured black, and he feared that if Ben came upon the rifleman he would kill him.

The path which the negro had taken was outlined for a short distance by the light from the torch, and Bob started along it in pursuit, calling for him to come back.

He had not gone far when he discovered that the sounds of the negro's feet had died away.

"Struck water, perhaps," was Bob's thought. "But even in that case I ought to hear him splashing through it, if he is still moving."

He stood still, listening. A conviction that here was something wrong struck him, and with it came that other feeling which impressed him at times—the presentiment of great danger.

He cautiously stepped from the path, fearing that a shot might come humming toward him through the woods.

Then the mystery of the thing drew him on.

He went forward carefully now, but kept to one side of the direct line of what had seemed to be the rifleman's flight, holding his rifle ready, for he did not know what instant he might need it.

He followed the course taken by the negro much farther than he had at first intended, without discovering anything; and had stopped to ponder over the singularity of what had happened, when he beheld, off at the right, and a considerable distance away, a glimmering light.

At first he thought it must be a jack-light in a boat. But the steadiness with which it burned soon told him this could not be; for, even if the boat was at rest, a jack-light, being a torch, and exposed to outdoor influences, would flash and flare at intervals. This light remained steady.

"In a house," he concluded; and walked warily toward it.

When he had proceeded in the new course a short distance the light vanished.

But Bob was determined to fathom the mystery, and he went on resolutely toward where the light had gleamed a moment ago.

It was a densely wooded section of the lowlands, and, in addition to dodging the wide tree trunks, he had to step carefully lest he plunge into one of the numerous miry pools and treacherous holes that beset his path.

When he had proceeded a few hundred yards, and was fast arriving at the conclusion that it would be an all-night matter to locate the cabin from which the light had apparently come, the yellow gleam flared into his eyes again.

A low knoll had intervened; and as he topped the rise he saw that the light was but a few rods distant.

He stopped a moment, and tried to gain an idea of the low, squat, single-

storied building that loomed darkly in the night.

A nearer approach revealed its outlines, and he saw that it was an old plantation house, which probably had been built at a time when the surrounding region was not as marshy and desolate as at present.

When he reached what had once been a garden, or cultivated grounds, the evidences of decay and abandonment became noticeable, even in the darkness. The garden fence had tumbled down, and was rotting on the wet ground; and weeds and litter of various kind filled the front yard.

Even yet Bob Halliday did not suspect Ben of playing a double part.

But, moving to one side to get a look through the window from which the light shone, he saw the burly negro sitting in the lamplight; and a suggestion that the thing was more than strange was borne in upon him as he crouched at the window sill.

The next instant what he beheld became a revelation.

Ben was talking with "Doctor" Timothy Dodd!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY.

Bob Halliday almost exclaimed in his astonishment.

Comprehension of what this meant came to him as in a wave. Though he still regarded Ben as but an ignorant Louisiana negro, the fact that he sat in that house, conversing with Timothy Dodd, was wonderfully significant.

Bob thought of the death of the hound, of the shots which had been fired into the skiff from the shore, and of Ben's wild attack on him. Ben had followed the rifleman, apparently pursuing him in a rage. Was Timothy Dodd that rifleman?

Angry tones floated out to Bob where he crouched in the darkness. Several of the windows were missing, and there was no need to strain his ears to hear what was transpiring within the old house.

Ben was apparently in a rage; and to the amazement of Bob the negro was expressing himself, not in the negro dialect, but in English as good as he himself used.

The Princeton lad could hardly credit his hearing. Was this the apparently untutored darky servant, full of good humor, with a fine knowledge of dogs, but with a mind blank on the higher things of life?

It was Ben beyond all question—a transformed Ben. The tattered clothing was there, the black face, and the big burly form; but the stalwart figure was now drawn erect, there was no hint of the servant left; indeed, there was something of dignity and command in his personality, and if Bob had closed his eyes he would have sworn that a white man was speaking.

"Playing double—and that means for a purpose, of course," Bob told himself, as he crouched beneath the broken window listening, with his gun clutched in his hand, ready for instant use.

A thousand surmises flashed into his brain, but the words that floated out to him in the night were more to him than surmises, and he set himself to catch what was said.

"If you don't know how to shoot a rifle straight you'd better not touch one," he heard the negro say. "That bullet of yours grazed my arm."

"I meant it for Halliday," Doctor Dodd whined apologetically. "I could see him quite plainly by the light of the torch, and it seemed such an easy shot. Didn't it strike him?"

"No, you idiot. It came within an ace of fracturing my arm. I made pretense of being hit and we pulled ashore."

"And Halliday—what did he do?"

"I give it up. I only know that I had another lovely scrap with that young college man; and I don't want any more—two's enough for me. He's as strong as an ox."

"Two!" thought Bob Halliday. "When did I have a scrap with him before?"

Ben supplied the missing link in his memory.

"I thought I could take him unawares, Dodd, and I grappled with him while he was under the impression that my arm was broken. But I slipped, and the strangle-hold didn't work. He dropped me—dropped me so hard that my brain is reeling yet. I might have known better than try grips with him after that experience on Canal Street."

Canal Street! Bob's lips pursed into an involuntary whistle—which he instantly suppressed—as he recalled the big, well-dressed negro who had behaved like a cad on the car, and into whom he had pounded a consciousness of his incivility. No wonder the darky's face had seemed familiar to him!

"But what I want to know," Ben continued angrily, "is why you were fool enough to try to shoot, when you knew that I was there and only waiting till we got to a particularly dark spot on the river where I could hit the bounder over the head with an oar and pitch him into the water. Couldn't you trust me to work the thing?"

"Well, it seemed such an easy shot," murmured Dodd, rubbing his hands and looking pleadingly up into the negro's face.

"Yes, everything seems easy to you!" growled Ben. "You declared it would be an easy job to abduct Halliday at the supper given to him by the Eagles."

Bob was learning things that night! A curtain was being drawn from a number of mysteries which had disturbed him considerably and which he had scarcely hoped to solve.

He found it difficult to restrain himself from breaking in upon the two rascals and taking the law into his own hands.

But the real identity of "Ben" was yet to be learned, and he fought down the impulse to attack, and kept his position at the broken window.

"Well, the abduction wasn't so very hard," retorted Dodd. "Jeff Collins and the Long Arm got away with him all right."

"Yes, and you know what happened in the cab!" Ben sneered, and threw up his hands disgustedly.

"I'll tell you what," he went on rapidly; "that fellow Halliday isn't to be caught by any child's play. All the same, Dodd, if we'd only got him into my snuggery, we'd have taught him such a lesson that he wouldn't have dared to lay his hands on a colored man again."

"Or a white man, either," added Dodd, a spark of color coming into his ghostly cheeks, now that the irritation of the big negro seemed to be abating. "Perhaps we'd have sent him back with one eye or some other little trifle missing," he chuckled.

"Well, he'd have been mighty lucky to have had only such a trifle missing," said Ben significantly. "That little old pet of mine, which pretty nearly scared you to death, Dodd, might not have been so merciful as the former owner of Dodd's sanitarium." And he laughed uproariously over his joke. "Wonder what chance Halliday would have if Baku had him in his grip?"

"Why are you so vindictive?" Dodd ventured, evidently sobered by the recollection of his first meeting with the "pet" Ben had referred to.

"I'll tell you," said the negro soberly. "I am a black man. There's no getting away from that. But I am as good as any white man living, and a good deal better than most. And when I am insulted by one of the white race, something in me stirs to action and I thirst for that man's life. Halliday pounded me as no man has ever pounded me, white or black, and—well, Halliday has got to suffer for it. And suffer he will, as sure as my name is Malolo."

It was out at last—the fawning, good-natured Ben was none other than Malolo, the high priest of Voodoo.

Bob Halliday had never heard of the man, but the name burned itself into his brain and he would never forget it.

"I think you had better get back to that boat now," urged Dodd, after a pause.

"What's the use of going back?" said Malolo disgustedly. "I have tried every plan you have suggested, and what have they all amounted to?" Once more the great hands were waved hopelessly in the air.

"What about the dog?" asked Doctor Dodd.

"The dog? Bah! He is dead. Halliday killed him."

"It went mad, all right?"

"Yes. I will say that your evil-smelling preparation worked like a Voodoo charm; but I wish you'd given me something that I could have slipped into his coffee, instead of simply setting a dog crazy."

Cautiously Bob made his way around to the entrance. The door was an ancient affair and creaked on its rusty hinges when he put his weight against it.

Listening intently, to assure himself that the noise had not disturbed the men in the side room, he passed on into the wide hall, which was dark as the tomb.

What he intended to do he did not quite know; but there was in his brain a set resolve to hold up the rascals at the muzzle of his gun, make them discard their own weapons, and then march them back to the boat, where his jack-light still flared at the bow.

Further than this he had no plans. If the hold-up turned out a failure—well, he would sell his life dearly.

A thin thread of light flickered beneath a door on his right, and he could hear indistinctly the voices of the plotters.

Suddenly he stumbled against a pillar and the gun slipped from his fingers.

Groping for it in the inky blackness, his foot sank into a hole in the floor, and he fell headlong.

A wild shout was borne to his ears. The side door was flung open, a blaze of light flashed into his eyes, and before he could scramble to his feet Malolo and Dodd were upon him.

Partly stunned by the blow on the head, he fought valiantly, but vainly; for, while his strength was equal to the burly negro's, the wiry frame of Doctor Dodd tipped the balance, and he was dragged into the side room and tied hand and foot.

He had thought to trap the villains, but he himself was trapped.

CHAPTER IX.

BILLY FRAZER, DELIVERER.

Lying there on the floor, bound and helpless, Bob soundly berated himself for his foolhardiness.

Facing him stood the negro he had known as "Ben," with the genial grin once more irradiating his face; though now there was a certain cruel leer around the corners of the wide mouth that boded no good for the captive.

At his side was Doctor Dodd, his flabby white cheeks mottled with hectic spots, his eyes burning with hate and anticipated vengeance upon the youth who had destroyed his lucrative "business."

"Now that you've got me, what are you going to do with me?" Bob questioned defiantly.

Malolo glared at him.

"Ho, ho!" he cried gleefully. "He wants to know what we will do with him. What do you think of it, Dodd?"

He stepped toward Bob and glared viciously down upon him.

"You don't remember me? Take a look at Ben, your negro servant!"

Bob looked at him scornfully.

"Oh, I know you!"

"Who am I, then? In other words: Boss, who is Ah? Des a no-'count New O'leans niggah, Ah 'spect. Yah-yah!" Malolo showed his teeth in a wicked grin.

"You're the worst negro and the biggest fraud and coward that ever disgraced his race. I remember you on that street car."

"You recollect that little affair, eh? That was where you came out on top. But this is where I win, 'Mr. Bob Halliday, of Princeton.'!"

"I'm glad you remembered *that*, at least," laughed Bob.

He was testing the cords on his wrists, which held his hands under him as he lay upon his back on the bare floor.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you?" asked Malolo.

"Take these cords off me, and I suppose, give me something to eat," returned Bob, forcing a smile.

Malolo's face underwent a change.

"Something to eat!" he sneered. "That's good. Yes, that's a bully idea."

He stooped over Bob as if about to undo the cords.

"You're a fool, if you monkey with him," warned Doctor Dodd, interrupting. "If you've got a knife, open an artery. That's the best way to settle him."

Malolo looked up with an unpleasant flash of his black eyes.

"I shall finish him—in my own way."

Malolo was a savage, in spite of his veneer of education. He had been born a savage, of savage parents, in a savage land. That he had been brought to America and put through a cramming process in American schools acccounted for his command of the English language and a smattering of knowledge, which made him consider himself a very great and wise man. But he was still a savage, with the heart and instincts of one.

The savage impulse which would always be his made the direct method proposed by the cold-blooded Dodd not pleasing. The quick killing of an enemy does not suit the savage mind. He prefers the slow process, with as much torture as he can put into it.

The votary of Voodoo turned disdainfully from the white-faced doctor and looked at the Princeton lad.

"Didn't you enjoy that hug I gave you, Mr. Halliday?" he asked, with a boisterous laugh. "You have our friend Dodd here to thank for that. It was his scheme. He prepared that pleasant aroma with which I decorated your coat, and also supplied me with an irritant that woke up Wolf's ancestral savagery. Poor old Wolf—de bestes' dog dat ebber was, boss!"

The good-natured grin with which he ended the sentence brought back to Bob the image of the mirthful Ben.

He bit his lips to prevent giving utterance to the angry retort that was on his tongue.

"You are a doctor," Malolo went on leisuredly, turning to Dodd. "You have been of considerable use to me with your cunning decoctions. Have you not got some sweet-tasting poison that will make Mr. Halliday squirm a bit before he shuffles off this mortal coil?"

Before Dodd could reply, a loud shout came as an alarm from the outside; and, following it, a bullet crashed through the window, striking the candle and plunging the room in darkness.

"Charge 'em, fellows! We've got the house surrounded! Don't let 'em get away!" a voice shouted.

There was a panic-stricken rush of feet down the broad hall, and almost instantly some one broke through the ancient window, and a bull's-eye lantern flashed in Bob's face.

By its gleams he caught sight of a face whose every feature was familiar, and he cried out in his relief:

"I'm not dreaming, old man; it's you, sure enough!"

In reply he heard the exclamation:

"Thank God, Bob, you're all right!"

It was the voice of little Billy Frazer.

Billy had made that quick and spectacular rescue single-handed.

He had heard the rifle shots which sent the bullets into Bob's boat. Hastening to that point, he had found the boat tied to the shore. Knowing that something was wrong, he had left his own negro boatman in charge of the skiffs, and had set out, searching and calling softly to his chum.

When his anxiety was deepest, he had seen the light in the abandoned house; and approaching it had discovered Bob's position and imminent peril.

Then, shooting out the light, he had raised that cry, to make the villains believe that a rescuing force had arrived.

It had worked like one of the charms of the Voodoo high priest.

It did not take Billy long to free Bob Halliday of the cords that held him. Bob's shotgun was in the house, with other weapons left by the two rascals in their panic-stricken flight.

Believing that as soon as the murderous pair had plucked up courage they

would return, the Princeton lads left the plantation house and retreated into the bushes, in the hope of trapping them.

Malolo and the doctor did not return; and, after a useless waste of time, the two lads went back to the boats, and to the hunting camp, where they told the story of the night's adventure.

CHAPTER X.

THE HOUR OF RECKONING.

At the first break of day the house where Malolo and Dodd had captured Bob Halliday was quietly surrounded. Here a watch was kept for some time, until the sun was well up in the sky.

It was useless; the birds had flown.

The young doctor and some of the negroes were left in charge, on the chance of the rascals returning. The other members of the party set out hurriedly for the railway station.

There they could find no trace of the men they were seeking. Some trains had passed, however, and telegrams were sent to New Orleans and other points, but they yielded no information.

The Princeton lads took the first train for the city, but Spencer and some of the other members of the party remained, with the intention of scouring the surrounding country and setting a watch over the abandoned house.

Reaching New Orleans, they hired a cab and drove at top speed to Malolo's place.

On the way Bob made two stops—one at headquarters to pick up a detective; the other at a gunsmith's, where he purchased revolvers for himself and Billy Frazer.

At last the cab was brought to a stop before the flamboyantly painted home of Professor Malolo.

Billy Frazer was first up the steps, and rang the bell. He kept his finger on the push-button till Cato, the negro servant, answered his call.

"Where's Malolo?" demanded Billy. "We want to see him right away."

"Yes, sah; yes, sah," said Cato, bowing obsequiously. "He ain't in, sah; but if you leave youah name, sah, de perfessah will suttinly be pleased."

At the end of the hall Billy fancied he saw shadows flitting, and to his ears was borne the sound of hurrying footsteps.

"Don't stop to parley!" cried the detective, who entered on a run, upsetting Cato as he darted through the hall.

"There's action for you!" gasped Billy, looking down at the prostrate Cato; but Bob Halliday grabbed him by the arm and hurried him along.

The red lamp still burned on the stand by the great hanging curtain, and the place looked weird and uncanny with that crimson glow on the spidery wall paper.

The door behind the curtain was open, and when the freshmen entered they found the detective on his knees beside a lounge, beneath which he was looking for Malolo.

The den was in perfect order. The red fire still crackled on the hearth, and above it the black pot bubbled merrily.

"The fellow has been here and gone!" said Billy disappointedly.

"Hardly," retorted the detective, rising from his knees. "That top drawer of the desk was locked. I broke it open. It contained nearly two hundred dollars, and if I am any judge of human nature, Malolo would not have gone without his roll of bills."

"You're a hustler all right!" Billy exclaimed. "You knock down a servant in the hall, and then break into a private drawer—all in the space of a few seconds!"

"I knocked down the servant on principle. There was the probability that his game was to keep us talking till the precious pair got away. I broke open that door also on a principle—anything that is locked always excites my suspicion, and if there are any clues, you'll often find them under lock and key.

"That roll of bills proves conclusively to my mind that Malolo has not skipped. Besides, look at the room—isn't it in apple-pie order?"

"I guess you're right," said Billy. "Malolo hasn't been in here."

"Then we'll wait here for him," declared the detective.

"Well, I'm going to make a search of the house on the off chance of his being in some of the other rooms," said Halliday; and brushing aside the heavy curtain, he started on his search, closely followed by Billy Frazer.

The detective returned along the hall to question the negro whom he had knocked down.

He shut the door and stood with his back against it to await further developments.

Meantime, Halliday and Frazer had searched the lower floor carefully, and had climbed up the broad staircase at the back of the hall and inspected the two rooms overhead.

They returned, with disappointment written on their faces.

"He is not here," said Bob. "We have gone over the place carefully, and there is not a trace of Malolo."

"Have you been upstairs?" asked the detective.

"Yes; there are only two rooms on the upper floor, and they are both empty."

"Two rooms? They must be mighty big ones!"

"No, they are not so very large."

"Then I'd stake my gun on there being other rooms that you have not discovered."

"Well, you won't get at them by way of the main stairway."

"Just the same, the house is too big for only two upstair rooms."

While they were discussing the matter they passed into the room behind the curtain—the professor's studio, so called.

After looking about the room curiously, Bob suddenly stepped to the panels beside the fireplace and tapped them.

"This sounds hollow," he said, looking at his companions. "I wish—— What's that?" he broke off and stared at the ceiling. Then he went on in an undertone: "Listen! I thought I heard some one moving overhead."

In a tense silence the three waited.

Billy was becoming fidgety, but Bob put his fingers to his lips. His keen ears were not deceived. Indistinctly they made out a shuffling sound as of some heavy body moving over the floor, then followed a strange, low growl.

Bob, who had been stooping beside the fireplace, rose softly to his feet.

"Where did that noise come from?" he whispered.

"It was in the house here, I could swear," said Billy.

"Sounds are deceptive," said the detective. "Maybe they came from the street."

He stepped to the window and, quietly raising it, leaned out.

From without came the familiar noises of street life—the distant rumble of heavy wagons, and the laughter of children playing near by.

He closed the window and came back on tiptoe.

"Heard anything more?" he whispered.

"Not a thing," Bob replied.

"Queer, wasn't it? Can there be a dog somewhere in the house?"

"I don't know," answered Bob. "I heard him say something to Dodd about a 'pet' he had."

"Where would it be?" asked Billy. "Why don't we tear down a few of the panels, and see if there isn't a secret closet somewhere?"

"No, no," objected the detective. "It's possible Malolo may be hiding, and the noise would warn him of our presence. If only that black servant hadn't skipped, I'd find a way to make him talk."

"That's what your 'acting on principle' did!" retorted Billy irritably. "You put him out of business, and he didn't want you to repeat the dose. So you lost the chance to question him."

The detective laughed softly. "When you grow a little older, my boy," he said, "you'll be less ready to criticize."

"All the same, Billy's right," declared Bob Halliday. "But this is no time to argue."

He had been tapping one of the panels

which rang hollow, as he spoke, and now he set his shoulder against it. There was a sound of something snapping, the panel swung outwards, and Bob tumbled into the passage.

He was on his feet in an instant and peering up a flight of stairs, indistinctly outlined in the gloom.

Billy Frazer and the detective climbed through the opening. The detective had come prepared with an electric hand lamp, and by its light they started cautiously up the stairs.

"Malolo is there!" whispered Bob. "I feel sure of it."

"And he's got a dog with him," added Billy. "Probably a brother to Wolf."

Halfway up Bob stopped and gripped the arm of the detective, who was slightly in advance.

"Look!" he yelled.

At the top of the stairs stood the giant Malolo, dressed as Bob had first seen him on Canal Street, and by his side was a far more ferocious beast than Wolf—the "pet" whom the Voodoo priest had introduced to his friend Dodd when the rascally doctor had sought sanctuary there some days before—the young gorilla.

The revolver cracked in the detective's hand. The report was followed by a terrific roar of mingled pain and rage.

"Now we have him!" cried Bob. "Get your gun ready, Billy!"

Bob Halliday went up the steps with great leaps, Billy Frazer and the detective close at his heels.

On the upper landing they paused undecided, while the detective swung his lamp around. Malolo and the ape had disappeared.

Again the thunderous roar split the silence, and there arose the unmistakable sounds of wild combat.

The flash of the lamp revealed an open door a few yards away, and toward this the detective rushed.

Before he could reach it a human cry of agony came from the darkness, followed by the sound of a heavy body falling.

Once more the roar sounded, but faint and hoarse; then dead silence.

The detective turned the light of his lamp into the room.

Malolo lay on the floor dead, his back broken by the gorilla; and across his body lay his ugly "pet," shot through the lungs by the detective.

"Well, that is one less undesirable citizen," said practical Billy Frazer. "I shouldn't wonder if that old schemer Dodd was secreted somewhere around."

Bob Halliday and the detective were too much stunned by the horror of the tragedy to hear him. They stood looking down at the lifeless forms of Malolo and his awful "pet," forgetful, for the moment, of all else.

But they were suddenly aroused to action by a voice from the adjoining room—a shaking voice in which revenge and fear mingled.

"Did Baku get them?" Then, after a pause: "Is Halliday dead?"

With admirable presence of mind, Billy Frazer grunted something that might be taken for an affirmative answer.

The door was cautiously opened, but Billy, setting his knee against it, swung it wide, and the light from the detective's lamp flashed into the face of Doctor Dodd.

Dodd gazed fascinated upon the glittering barrel of Billy's pistol, then his eyes shifted to the silent forms on the floor.

His lips were opened to speak, but the awful sight froze the words on his tongue. A look of indescribable horror flitted across his blanched face. Staggering back, his long thin hands waved idly in the air, he tottered, and collapsed in a heap.

"Well, Billy, I suppose you want to get to the hotel right away?" said Bob Halliday, as they left the gayly painted house.

"Why?" asked Billy Frazer.

"Oh, I remember that you were interrupted in a letter to an up-State cousin several days ago, and I don't believe you finished it. You will have a real budget of news for that pretty cousin of yours, now, my boy."

"I say," said Billy suddenly, "what's the matter with running up there and *telling* her the story instead of *writing* about it?"

"Good idea, Billy."

"And you'll come?"

"Sure thing."

"Bob," said Billy slowly and with great seriousness, "since we came South you've had pretty much your own way with what you call 'opposing forces.' Being a ripping good fighter, you've come out on top, old man. But I have a hunch that before you return to Princeton you'll lower your banners before a very insignificant little person who doesn't weigh over a hundred pounds."

"And the insignificant person, Billy?"

"Is Cousin Miriam."

THE END.

THE CLIMBERS

By JOHN D. EMERSON

If suddenly, without apparent effort and for no reason that could be perceived, the most indolent, backward boy in school should rise to the head of his class and stick there month after month, although, still dawdling his time away and neglecting his studies, what would you think? And supposing four or five of his particular chums, likewise naturally slothful or dull, should also step up above the brightest scholars and the hardest workers in that school, wouldn't it set you guessing?

Jack Yule was peeling his baseball togs in his room at the Brookville Prep. School when the door was flung open violently and Wetherbee Flagg entered on the run.

Now, ordinarily, Wetherbee Flagg was the very soul of dignity. His black-rimmed glasses sat on his youthful nose with a precision that indicated a finely balanced mind. There was an austerity about the placid, high forehead that forbade levity.

It was this well-balanced Wetherbee that had, for the moment, thrown his good breeding aside and let the young animal in him assert itself by banging open the door.

No wonder Jack Yule was surprised. This abrupt, not to say excited, entrance meant something—something of tragic intent.

"What's happened, Flaggy, old boy?" asked Jack genially.

"Terrible! Awful! Cannot explain it!" The words came like little explosives from the perturbed youth.

"Who's murdered?"

"Oh, unthinkable! Incomprehensible! In——" He sputtered, hesitated, stopped altogether, utterly at a loss for words sufficiently strong to express his wrath.

"Great Scott! give it a name," implored Jack.

"Oh, you won't believe me. The win-

ners in yesterday's exam. are posted, and—and——" He gulped hard.

"And you're not a top-notcher, eh?" from Jack.

"*I'm* not. *You're* not. Nobody is that's any good. Who do you think is first on the list?"

"Probably Carson or Forbes. I guess you and I show up pretty well, Flaggy. With Dixon, and Bishop, and Gates, and that bunch of muckers at the tail end."

"Dixon is the first name on the list!"

Jack sat down suddenly. His blue eyes opened wide.

"That—big—bluffer!" he gasped incredulously.

It was unthinkable, as Wetherbee had said. Dixon had always shirked recitations when he could. He never worked. Nobody ever appealed to him for the solution of a problem.

"Not only that"—Flagg was piling on the agony—"but the six fellows on top are Dixon's crowd—the biggest dunderheads in Brookville."

"Oh, Flaggy, I simply won't believe it," said Jack, now thoroughly aroused. "I've 'poled' mighty hard for this exam., and to-day's the first let-up I've had in a long time. And I know you've burned the midnight oil, too, old boy. Yet you tell me we are among the 'also rans.'"

Wetherbee Flagg nodded. He was glad that he had imparted some of his chagrin to big, good-natured Jack Yule; for misery loves company. He was a little frightened, too, for when that steely look came into Jack's blue eyes it meant trouble for somebody.

"There's been some mistake," Jack asserted. "Old Prexy Pratt has got our papers twisted. Anyway, I'm going out to see what Dixon has to say about it."

His lips set in a straight, thin line. With a haste that astonished Wetherbee Flagg, he finished dressing, jerked his tie into position, flattened his hat down over his brow, and strode out on the campus.

"Hey, there! What train are you going to catch?"

Jack, striding down the path, swung around at the question and gazed into the twinkling eyes of little Christy Chambers.

"Feel some peevish?" Christy grinned.

"I sure do," retorted Jack. "I feel peevish enough to kill somebody. What I'd like to know is how Dixon got on top in that exam. yesterday? Everybody knows what an ass he is."

"And how about me?" asked the youngster. "I was fourth on the list."

"Well, Christy, to be plain, I can't say you deserved it. You've been hitting the high spots with Dixon's crowd and having a gay old time; and how you managed to gain such a big percentage with so little work gets me."

"It's dead easy. Join the Mountaineers."

"What's that?"

"A secret society. I didn't mean to say anything about it; but you're an awfully decent fellow, and I'll let you in on a good thing," said Christy magnanimously.

"What's its object?" asked Jack.

"Just what the name suggests. Be a mountain-peak man; don't stay down in the valley. The mountain peak, according to our interpretation, is the top of the bulletin announcing the exam. results. Pretty good aim, eh? The Mountaineers has a membership of six. Say the word, and I'll see that you are the seventh."

"But what's your scheme for keeping on top?" inquired Jack.

"That's our secret. After the initiation ceremony you will know all."

"Is Dixon a member?"

"Yes. He's Lord High Climber."

"That settles it. I guess I don't want to belong."

"Oh, come now. Dixon isn't so bad."

"Maybe I'm wrong in my judgment," said Jack charitably. "But I've formed an opinion of Dixon that he wouldn't like to hear."

"Well, you'll admit it's a pretty worthy ambition to be a mountain-peak man. Emerson said something about hitching your wagon to a star. We hitch ours to the top of a mountain. If you follow our methods you'll be able to play ball all you want to, and still be among the top-notchers in the exams. You don't have to look far down the list to find the names of the six Mountaineers."

"It sounds attractive," admitted Jack.

"I should say so. Better come around to Dixon's to-night and get in on the great secret."

Jack's curiosity was aroused, and he gave a half-hearted consent to show up at the session of the Mountaineers that night.

Piloted by Christy Chambers, who gave the fraternity rap and whispered the password through the keyhole, Jack passed the portals of Dixon's room, and was ushered into the sacred company of the Mountaineers.

Dixon rose as the door opened.

"Welcome to the Mysterious Amalgamation of Mountaineers," he declaimed, in a grand manner. "Rise, brothers, and let the initiation ceremony begin. Candidate: John Yule. Sponsor: Christopher Chambers."

"I'd like to ask a question or two first," proposed Jack, looking with some amusement into the faces of the six bold Mountaineers.

"No questions allowed," snapped Dixon.

"But," Jack insisted, "before I unite my humble person to your august assembly I should like to know——"

"Shut up!" interrupted Bishop.

"Cut out the eloquence," said Gates. "This isn't the Senate."

"Order!" shouted the Lord High Climber. "The question before the society is: Does the said John Yule wish to become a member of the Society of Mountaineers and remain faithful to its ideals?"

"Not till I know what the ideals are," said Jack promptly.

"Oh, hang it! Dixon, let's tell him," pleaded Christy. Then, without waiting for permission, he went on quickly:

"It's a matter of getting hold of the exam. papers, Jack. Dixon's brother was at Brookville ten years ago, and Dixon made the brilliant discovery that Prexy Pratt was giving the same questions that were set in his brother's time. Luckily his brother kept all his exercise books and exam. papers, and—well, you see, don't you?"

Jack saw—and his face crimsoned with the shame of it all. President Pratt was one of the old school of teachers. He believed that what was good for one set of boys was good for another. Dixon's brother had the old papers, and it was simply a question of getting up the answers and neglecting everything else.

"Dead easy, isn't it, Jack?" Christy insinuated.

"And now that you've let out the secret," sneered Dixon, "I bet Yule will go straight off to Prexy Pratt and blab."

Jack Yule advanced a few strides and stood towering over the sneering Lord High Climber, his eyes shining, his hands clinched.

"If you say that again, Dixon, I'll knock you down!" he said, and not a boy in the room could doubt that he meant it. "I don't blab. I'm not that sort. But I want to say that I never heard of a more sneaky business than this society that you are engineering."

He turned suddenly upon the astonished Mountaineers. The outburst had left him pale, but his lips were trembling.

"Fellows," he went on more quickly, "I'm willing to bet my last cent that you'll regret this all your lives. You may fake your work through prep. school, but what about college? Oh, I'm sorry, fellows—more sorry for little Christy Chambers here. I thought he had more decent stuff in him than to mix up in a game like this. Pah! The thing sickens me."

Abruptly he turned on his heel and left them.

It was the custom at Brookville to allow three days interval to elapse between each examination, and to post the percentages of the contestants on the bulletin board on the following day.

Jack was glad of the interval, and he was determined to spend every minute

of it on his books. The lure of the baseball diamond was strong in him, but he set his lips firmly and resisted all pleadings.

He took into his confidence the bespectacled youth, Wetherbee Flagg, and told him the whole miserable story of the Mountaineers.

Flagg promptly urged an interview with President Pratt. But Jack's code of honor wouldn't allow him to "blab."

"I wouldn't do it, old man," he declared. "Little Christy fancied he was doing me a good turn, and I won't peach on him. It's their funeral, not ours. It's up to us to get busy and beat them out."

The day of the struggle dawned—a Saturday; a couple of hours' intense application over the twelve questions, from ten to twelve, and then the rest of the day a holiday.

The boys fell into their places and the papers were distributed. Jack scanned the questions on his own particular sheet, then turned a moment to look at Dixon.

The Lord High Climber had accepted his paper with a furtive glance at Jack. Next moment he smiled broadly—it was evident that the secret of the Mountaineers was still safe. He was conscious of a feeling of respect and awe for this broad-shouldered youth who had him in his power, and who scorned to take advantage of the secret that Christy had blurted out. But there was not a trace of regret for his own rascality as he set his pen in motion.

Wetherbee Flagg, sitting behind Jack, was groaning under his breath. Question number one was giving him a bad time. He stole a look at the six Mountaineers, who were all diligently scribbling for dear life. For a moment he was tempted to reveal the great secret to the president, but Jack's example held him in check.

At half-past eleven most of the boys were still struggling with their questions, but the Climbing Six showed no traces of worry in their faces. Their pens never stayed; their brows were never furrowed by agonized wrinkles.

One by one the contestants rose and silently departed, leaving behind those whose names were to appear at the head of the list on Monday.

The president leaned over his desk critically, his little keen eyes narrowing.

"It is a surprise to me," he mused, "how that boy Dixon works now. Bishop, and Gates, and Carson are three other suddenly developed aspirants. I can't understand it. Flagg is a hard student, and Yule is one of the best boys here; but these others—no, I can't make it out."

Twelve o'clock: the few boys remaining at the desks laid down their pens. The ordeal was over.

In the scramble for the door Dixon managed to get close to Jack.

"You're all right," he whispered gratefully. "I hate to beat you, of course, but—you're white, Yule. I'll give you a tip on Wednesday's exam. The first question will be: Give a list of Cæsar's generals."

There was blood in Jack's blue eyes. For the second time his fingers itched to punish this cheating youngster. But Dixon had seen the ominous glare in the steel-blue eyes and fled precipitantly.

When the examination results appeared Dixon was again on top. Jack Yule had managed to gain second place. Following him came four of the other Mountaineers, then Wetherbee Flagg. Christy Chambers appeared far down on the list.

"I'll beat Dixon and get on top yet, if I have to sweat blood to do it," declared Jack, as he disgustedly scanned the bulletin board.

On the Wednesday, when the boys had taken their places for the final examination in Roman history, Jack picked up his question paper with considerable anxiety.

He had forgotten Dixon's tip till that moment, but now it flashed into his brain and he looked for the query concerning Cæsar's generals.

It was not the first question—it was not the second, nor the third. Nor, as Jack presently discovered, was it anywhere on the sheet.

He looked up quickly. In the dead silence he heard gasps. Bishop was holding his paper at arm's length; it was deadly unfamiliar. Dixon was running his hands through his hair, staring down at the white sheet with eyes filled with surprise.

Jack chuckled.

"Something's happened," he thought. "Prexy's smelled a rat and changed the questions. Heaven pity the Climbers! But I've got my own work to do, and it promises to be pretty steep."

For an hour he plodded through the string of historical questions. About eleven o'clock he paused.

"Half time," he said mentally. At that moment he caught Dixon's eye across the desks and gave him an unmistakable wink. Bishop's face was sculptured agony. Gates had dipped his pen in the inkwell a hundred times, but his pages were all but bare.

Little Christy Chambers, alone of the bold Mountaineers, stuck manfully to his work, and rose with Jack Yule as the clock struck.

"May I come up with you to your room?" he asked.

"Sure," said Jack. "Feel about all in, don't you? What a shame to slight the generals of poor old Cæsar! That lovely tip I had from the Lord High Climber himself. But like many another tip, it didn't work."

"That's what I want to talk to you about, Jack. I'm pretty well ashamed of myself."

"Of course you are! The cigarette fiend who suddenly finds his heart acting queerly begins to think he is ashamed of himself. That's usually the way. You play with fire and get your fingers burned—then you feel ashamed of yourself."

"Don't pile it on, Jack. I've felt like a cad all along. But Dixon and that crowd sort of mixed the issues, and I looked at things from a wrong angle."

They had climbed the stairs of Ferris Hall, and Jack opened his door.

"Go right in, Christy, and make yourself at home, old boy," he said, removing his coat and flinging himself on the bed lounge. "I don't know how you feel, but I'm about used up."

"Well, I haven't worked as hard as you," Christy laughed. "But I think I've done good work this time."

"Eh? Despite the fact that the sure tips were phony ones?"

Christy nodded. "Yes. I 'poled' honestly for this exam. and didn't depend upon ten-year-old papers. As a matter of fact, I am no longer a member of the Mountaineers."

"Huh! Fired you, I suppose, Christy, for introducing a hot-headed kicker like me to their august company?"

"No. It wasn't that. You talked straight that night, and it set me thinking. I couldn't sleep, and I determined to cut out the whole business and tell Prexy the secret."

"What? It was you, then!" Jack sat bolt upright on the cot. "You played the sneak!"

"Hold on, Jack," pleaded Christy, shrinking from the steel-blue eyes. "I didn't do it. I only thought about it. I guess Prexy got onto the fraud himself. But, anyway, I was sick and disgusted with myself, and I got out."

"Good boy, Christy!" Jack's blue eyes had lost their steely glitter and were soft as an inland lake. "I knew there was the right stuff in you. You'll make good, all right, kid."

Christy did make good, as Jack had prophesied, for when the results of the examination were posted on the bulletin board the second name on the list was Christopher Chambers, with ninety-four per cent. Flagg was third, with ninety-three per cent. Bunched at the bottom were five of the Mountaineers. At the top of the list was the name of John Yule, with ninety-eight per cent., the record at the school exams. that season.

That afternoon Christy visited Jack's room in great jubilation, and spent a solid hour there. When he left he carried away a souvenir that had hung over Jack's study table—a souvenir that Christy vows he'll never part with. It reads: "It Pays To Be Straight."

ON THE HOME PLATE

By JACK GORDON

Here's a baseball story, and something more—a lesson; but it isn't a lecture, and there's not a dull line in it. Silly superstition led Jim Bradley into a desperate plight which nearly cost him his life, but eventually he demonstrated that he had plenty of "good stuff" in his make-up.

"Win? Of course we'll win." "Shorty" Jones balanced himself on the top of the fence and kicked his heels emphatically against the bottom rail. His round, jolly face was aglow with enthusiasm.

But there was no answering glow in the face of the lanky youth backed up against the post beside him, his hands stuck deep in his pockets. "Big Mac" —Robert Morrison MacLean, to give him his full name—was clearly anything but enthusiastic.

"The Morningsides have a pretty good reputation," he said dolefully.

"Huh! What of it?" demanded Shorty from his perch on the top rail. "They have earned a big rep. on the strength of licking a few cubs. But when they stack up against the Lincoln Seminary nine you'll see mighty glum looks among the supporters of the Morningside High School. We're going to play for the honor of old Lincoln to-morrow, and we're going to play to win."

He waited for some response, but none was forthcoming, and he broke out:

"What's the matter with you, anyway, Mac? Is it the Scotch in you? Better put a little more sugar in your coffee from this time henceforth and forever. Amen."

"Shorty, don't be profane!" said big Mac severely. "We've got a thundering hard game on to-morrow, and I want you to realize it."

"Oh, shut up, you old croaker!" cried Shorty. "I know all about that game, all right. But I am not doing any worrying so long as Jim Bradley is captain——"

"That's just it, Shorty."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Well, Jim is the one man on the team I'm afraid of."

"Say, Mac, you want to see a doctor. You've got cobwebs in the think-box. Don't know what's good for cobwebinitis, but I suggest a gentle application of a club on the cranium; and I'll be glad to play doctor free of charge if you say another word about Jim Bradley. What's the matter with him, I'd like to know? Isn't he the best fellow that ever lived?"

"He sure is," big Mac agreed warmly. "Isn't he a big, square-shouldered, strong-muscled fellow, with a swing in his arms that means death to a baseball and back to the bench for the batters?"

"It's true, Shorty, every word of it."

"Isn't he the best pitcher you ever heard of?" insisted Shorty.

"Yes—if only he'd keep sane. I'm willing enough to acknowledge that Jim's a dandy on the diamond, but——"

"No 'buts' about it," snorted Shorty.

"But," big Mac went on placidly, "Jim is bitten by a species of superstitious mania that makes me kind of nervous. If he ever happens to look at the new moon over the left shoulder he's pretty nigh sick. You never saw him walk under a ladder or——"

"Oh, piffle! That don't affect his play," interrupted Shorty.

"But it does, old boy. You can't understand it, Shorty. But when the superstitious bug gets a grip on you it rattles you from baseball to trigonometry."

"Huh! I guess we all know about Jim's eccentricities, Mac. But you needn't worry about them. Jim won't let anything stand in the way of bumping the Morningsides to-morrow."

"Perhaps you're right, Shorty," said big Mac slowly. "Only—if anything should happen and Jim doesn't play, we've got to go in and win the game for him just the same."

"Gee whiz! I guess I'd feel just about as blue as you, Mac, if Jim don't play."

"That's what I was afraid of. And that's why I warn you to be prepared for anything that may happen. I don't suppose I look overhopeful, but when I saw Jim behave like a lunatic an hour or two ago over some little thing that he called bad luck, it jarred me up considerable; and I had a premonition that before we pull off the game one or two more bad omens will come Jim's way. But at heart I'm just as confident as you, Shorty, that we'll win out."

"Bully for you, Mac!" cried Shorty. "Cheer up, old son. We'll get 'em, all right. Well, let's get back. I'll race you to the seminary gates."

Big Mac was game, but the race ended ignominiously for him. In spite of his long legs, he couldn't keep the pace set by the nimble Shorty, and, giving up the hope of victory, he slowed down to a walk and sauntered slowly back, brooding over his premonitions.

Shorty entered the seminary gates on the run, and was bounding on when he felt his collar grasped by a relentless hand and he was swung round gasping.

He looked up into the face of the youth they had been talking about—Jim Bradley, captain and pitcher of the Lincoln Seminary team. A splendid specimen of young America he was—a big, upstanding youngster, with fire in his eyes, and a suggestion of tremendous vitality in his well-knit frame. His waist line was small, but that was the only small thing about him. He didn't need any padding in the shoulders of his coat, for there were no hollows to be filled out. Nature, plenty of exercise, and an optimistic temperament had combined to produce as healthy a "Seminole" as ever wore the orange and black of old Lincoln.

"What's the hurry, Shorty?" asked Jim.

"Mad dog!" announced Shorty, with a twinkle in his eye.

"What?" Jim looked around in alarm.

"Well, a grouchy Scotchman, if you like that better. Big Mac is somewhere in the rear—thought his long legs would bring him here as quick as my short ones, but he has another think coming. What's the score going to be to-morrow, Jim?"

"Can't guess, Shorty, but it's going to be pretty close. Better keep your sprinting stunts till you get on the diamond. By the way, have you seen anything of a Chinese coin belonging to me?"

"You bet I've seen it—never saw you without it, in fact. You never let that blessed chink nickel get out of your possession, to my knowledge."

"Well, I've lost it, Shorty. Hope it don't change my luck. I thought a good deal of that coin."

"Oh, don't worry. It'll turn up all right," said Shorty, anxious to switch the big pitcher's mind from anything that savored of bad luck. "Say, Jim, I feel in a sprinting mood. Come over to the ball grounds and I'll give you a free show."

Jim Bradley laughed, and allowed Shorty to drag him along.

Hardly had they reached the athletic field when Jim clutched the youngster's arm with a grip that made him wince.

"Look!" he cried, pointing at the home plate. "A black crow on the diamond—horrible!"

Shorty stole a frightened glance at the big pitcher; then, looking toward the home plate: "That's a crow, all right," he admitted. "It's black as Egypt, and it's on the diamond. But why do you want to get into a blue funk over that? It won't eat you."

"It means the most awful luck, Shorty! Oh, you beast!" Jim Bradley picked up a stone and let it drive in the direction of the crow.

"Poor shot," commented Shorty, as the crow flew away, rasping out three derisive caws by way of protest. "You've got to pitch straighter than that to-morrow if you want to win."

"I won't pitch to-morrow," said Jim morosely. "It means certain defeat if I do."

"What on earth's biting you?" asked Shorty. "What has a crow to do with it?"

"It's a bad omen, Shorty—the very worst kind. Shouldn't wonder if the beggar has found my Chinese coin and made off with it."

"Oh, slush!" said Shorty irreverently.

"You know nothing about the occult," retorted Jim Bradley. "A black bird brings bad luck every time. Those three caws mean that the Morningsides will lick us by three runs."

"Well, if that isn't the most slab-sided specimen of tommy-rot!" exclaimed Shorty.

"All the same, Shorty, I'm up against it," said Jim seriously. "There's only one way out of it—I've got to kill a black crow before to-morrow's game or we're done for."

He refused to discuss the matter further, and Shorty ran off to find big Mac and tell him the story of the crow.

That afternoon the Lincoln team, according to schedule, assembled on the ball field for practice; and so keen was the interest in the coming game that every member of the nine was present, with one exception—Jim Bradley, who of all others was expected to be there, since he was captain and pitcher.

He did not show up, however, and his roommate, Bill Edwards, brought the news that Jim had "gone for a walk" and that the team should "go on with the practice without him."

Big Mac took command, but there was a worried look in his face that only Shorty Jones could understand.

As both the youths surmised, Jim Bradley had gone crow-hunting. But crows were by no means plentiful in the neighborhood, and Jim had a difficult task before him.

He hadn't the slightest idea where he could find a crow; but a crow he must have, or woe to the Lincoln Seminary nine on the morrow!

As Jim was passing a bookstore near the centre of the town, Pat Hogan, the janitor of the seminary, came out with an armful of books.

Noticing the look of gloom on Jim Bradley's face, Hogan asked in his kindly fashion:

"An' whot's th' matther now, me b'y? Ye look as if ye'd swallyed a hearrse. Shure, isn't th' big game comin' off th' morrow, an' ye look as if yer side was bate already!"

"Oh, it isn't that," said Jim hesitatingly. "It's—something else." He stopped and looked keenly into the Irishman's eyes, and it suddenly occurred to him that here was the man who could aid him in his quest. "Pat, do you know where I could get a crow?" he asked abruptly.

"A crow!" Pat Hogan's eyebrows went up in surprise. "A crow, is ut! Is ut f'r eatin' purposes, now, ye want ut? Shure ye might l'ave thot gasthronomic fate till afther th' morrrow's game, I'm thinkin'."

Jim was inclined to be angry at this badinage, but he repressed his feelings and donned the cloak of diplomacy.

"It's a little bet, Patsy," he explained. "If I don't find that crow, no game for me to-morrow."

"Och, shure, whoy didn't ye say thot afore ye shpoke? Thot's different, av coorse. But crows is moighty scarce hereabouts, an' I don't think as ye'll come acrost th' real article nearer th'n th' parrk; an' *they're* not to be touched unless ye hov a pull wid th' parrk sup'rintindint—an' there's nothin' doin' there, f'r he's a dour Scotchman."

The park! Why hadn't he thought of that before? for it was well known that a large number of crows and other birds were maintained at public expense in the park, mainly for the benefit of the local ornithological cranks who took great interest in them.

There was a heavy penalty for molesting them, and the park keepers were strict and impartial in enforcing the law.

True, getting a crow would be a comparatively easy matter, but there was great risk of detection. Yet a crow must be had at any cost, as a sacrifice to the Goddess of Fortune, and it must be forthcoming very soon. So, with jaws set and a fierce determination in his heart, Jim Bradley went back to his room, procured his revolver, and set out for the hill.

He waited till after sundown before entering the park, which by that time was deserted save for the keepers. A glorious moon swam out from a mist of cloud, and Jim's heart beat rapidly as he saw a crow fly lazily across a moonlit patch of lawn and vanish in a clump of elms.

Sprinting across the grass plot in a fashion that would have aroused the admiration of Shorty Jones, he took his stand under the elms and waited.

To his ears was borne music—the sweetest music that he had ever heard—the cawing of crows.

It came from a tall tree only a few yards away, and Jim exulted in anticipation as his fingers tightened on the revolver.

As Jim stood watching and waiting a large crow swooped down from the tree above him and, picking up some bright object from the ground—it looked in the moonlight like a piece of glass—was about to fly back to its nest.

This chance was too good for Jim to lose, and, as the crow was but a few feet away and plainly discernible, he aimed quickly and fired! The immediate result was all that the superstitious youth could have desired; for the bullet hit the mark, and after a few short *croaks*, the crow was dead.

Jim's next thought was to get away without being discovered. It was time, for he had no sooner thrust his revolver in the pocket of his coat than a policeman's whistle sounded shrilly about a hundred yards away, and the evidences of pursuit were unmistakable.

To get out of the park was, of course, Jim's first thought, and over flower beds, over fences, through thorny brush, tearing his clothes, barking his shins against trees, scratching his face in wild rushes through brambles, he sped along like the wind.

Presently he saw the friendly gleam of the park gates a few yards ahead. But, looking as he did, it would have been suicidal to emerge into the open streets at the park entrance. Instead he veered into a by-path that led to an unfrequented thoroughfare, ending at the river near the power house of the trolley company.

The race was still on, and Jim was becoming winded. But the success of his team was at stake, and, setting his teeth firmly, he rushed on like a madman.

"Halt, or I'll fire!" he heard some one call, and a bullet whizzed past him.

But Jim didn't stop to explain matters. He was afraid that he would be held for trial and locked up as a suspicious person for several days. This would mean that the game would go on without him. And just when he had lifted the hoodoo, too! It was not to be thought of for a moment. He was determined to play to-morrow, and was willing to take any risks.

So he kept on, dodging into gloomy-looking paths, stumbling, falling, rising, and darting on again, his breath coming in short, quick gasps. At last, when he felt that he must drop, he emerged

quite suddenly from the park and found himself on the street close to the power house.

Looking hastily around, he saw a flat trolley truck loaded with two gigantic ash cans. It took but an instant to dart around the truck, hop on it, and disappear in one of the ash cans, which to Jim's joy was only half full.

He pulled down the lid, which fell with a bang.

"Safe at last," Jim gasped, as he settled down upon the soft ashes.

Indistinctly he heard the confused shouts of the searching party, intermingled with the laughter of some of the trolley conductors who were indulging in horseplay at the door of the power house.

Then close alongside came the cry:

"Right! Let her go!"

To Jim's ears came the jar of released brakes. The power was turned on and the truck began to move.

"Fine!" chuckled the hidden boy. "Hit 'er up! This is where we give the bloodthirsty park keepers the merry ha-ha. The fellows won't believe me when I tell them about this luxurious Pullman. All the same, I wish the porter would come around and open a window," he added lugubriously. "Guess I'd better not risk taking that lid off just yet, but I'd give a good deal for a little fresh air."

He bore the stifling atmosphere as long as he could, then he began carefully to press the lid upward.

"I think this is where I make my exit," he muttered. "Hate to leave this snug little cubby-hole, but—— Eh—what——"

Between the words he pushed violently, spitefully on the lid. But it didn't budge a fraction.

"Locked myself in, by thunder!" he gasped. He recalled the bang with which the heavy lid had closed and guessed that the hasp had fallen over the staple, locking it as effectively for the victim inside as if it had been the costly lock of a safe-deposit vault.

"I've got to get out—*got to!*" Jim screamed, and he struck the lid with his fists again and again till the blood dripped from his hands. He kicked impotently at the sides of the can, then took to shouting. But his cries were drowned in the roar of the onrushing truck.

"It's that coin I lost," he said weakly; and he dropped down on the ashes, panting.

For a long moment he lay, breathing laboriously. "The game!" he cried, in a stifled whisper. His senses were reeling with the foul air of the can and the swaying of the truck. "Big Mac will pitch. He'll beat 'em to it. Sure thing. They won't miss me—so long—as—big——"

His head dropped back against the side of the can. Reason fled. A deadly stupor settled over his senses.

The next thing Jim was conscious of was a great shouting, the flare of torches, the sudden movement of the ash can, a swing in the air, and then a sickening sensation as he felt his body hurled through space and dropping down—down—down until he thought he had fallen from an air ship. The earth rose up and struck him. Something snapped in his brain—he had fainted.

When Jim came to his senses he was in the pilot house of an ocean-going tugboat. It was daylight, and he was stretched on some cushions and wrapped in a huge blanket. He raised himself slowly and staggered to his feet on the swaying floor of the pilot house. But he was so dizzy and weak that he could not stand, and he dropped wearily back upon the cushions.

In front of him he saw the broad back of the steersman of the tug.

"Where am I?" Jim asked huskily.

"Hello! Woke up, matey?" exclaimed the man at the wheel, without turning his head.

"Where am I?" Jim repeated.

"Aboard the *Restless,* son. Ain't no better tugboat hailin" from Perth Amboy."

Jim was only partly enlightened. "But what am I doing here?" he inquired.

"See that big scow astern?" The helmsman threw his head back, but didn't remove his gaze from the binnacle for the fraction of a second. "Well, matey, one of the scow's crew heard you groanin' last night. He pulled you out and brought you aboard the *Restless.* Lucky for you, too; for inside of five minutes more, by the Lord Harry! he'd have opened the bottom of the scow and dumped you and the ashes into Davy Jones' deep-sea drawin'-room." The big shoulders of the man at the wheel heaved as if he were enjoying the grim joke.

Jim Bradley's mind was now becoming clearer, and in a few moments he got his bearings.

"I remember it all now," he said.

"Do, eh? Hope there ain't no snarls in the yarn. Here comes the skipper."

Once more the great head was flung backward significantly, and Jim heard heavy steps on the deck below.

"Go slow with the skipper, matey," cautioned the man at the wheel. "He ain't got no use for beachcombers, I tell 'ee." He laid ponderous emphasis on the words, but Jim shrewdly suspected that the big seaman was only making game of him.

The door of the pilot house was pushed open, and the captain entered—a robust, heavily bearded, red-faced little man, with a gleam of humor twinkling in his sea-blue eyes.

"So-ho, m' lad, you're alive, eh?" he greeted, grinning not unkindly at the bewildered youth. And, settling his plump body on a camp chair, with his fat little legs spread wide apart, he invited Jim to "pipe up."

Jim told his story in detail; and he had no fault to find with his listeners; for despite the good-natured jests that punctuated his speech, they were both keenly interested in his narrative.

"Somehow I feel as if I were in a dream," he concluded, "and may wake up to more bad luck. And it's all on account of that blamed crow which tried to put the hoodoo on our game with Morningside!" Poor Jim's expression was so rueful and so whimsical that the hearty little captain broke into a tempest of guffaws.

But the thought of the game to be played that very day—for it was now about eleven o'clock in the morning—roused Jim from his bewilderment, and he anxiously inquired when the tug would get back to port.

For some time he was unable to get much satisfaction from the skipper and the big steersman, who were highly amused by the story; and ever and anon to Jim's disgust, they gave various imitations of a crow's croak.

At last he made an appeal that was almost tearful in its intensity, and told why he so earnestly wished to get to the ball field as soon as possible.

The appeal succeeded.

"If the tide holds good, m' lad," said the bluff captain, "we'll be at our dock, barrin' fog or delay from some other cause, before four this afternoon. When I was a boy I used to be a great hand for baseball myself, and I can sympathize with you."

And the tugboat captain was as good as his word, for a few minutes before four o'clock the *Restless* was tied up at her wharf, and the next minute Bradley was speeding on a trolley car to the scene of the game.

"Batter up!"

It was the beginning of the fifth inning. The Morningsides had piled up three runs, and the Lincolns hadn't had a look in. Despair settled over the heart of big Mac, who was pitching in the place of Jim Bradley.

With the exception of the big Scotchman and Shorty Jones, there was no life in the Lincoln Seminary eleven. The absence of Jim Bradley had played havoc with batting and fielding alike.

Big Mac could not know that at that moment Jim was speeding swiftly toward the athletic field; but he sent a roving glance out over the smiling fields, in the vain hope that he might catch sight of the superstitious youth who had gone crow-hunting.

He felt that an ignominious defeat lay ahead. But he was determined to

fight it out to the last gasp, and his lips tightened as he toed the slab and looked grimly at the tall, well-built lad who faced him—Mason, the captain of the Morningsides, who was the first man up.

"Line 'er out, Mase!" "We've got 'em on the run!" yelled the Morningside supporters.

Mason grinned. Big Mac saw the grin. It maddened him. He sent in a hot one that Mason slammed at. But his bat met nothing but air.

"Strike!" yelled the umpire.

Mason's face lost its grin. He settled himself and met the next ball squarely, and drove it full in the face of Roy Fetter.

It ought to have been an easy catch, but Roy, like most of the Lincolns, was playing listlessly, and he let the ball slip through his hands. When he got it back, Mason was safe on first.

Big Mac was mad clear through—so mad that his big right arm refused to be steadied, and he gave Davis, the second batsman, a free pass.

This sobered the big fellow, and he struck out the next man. The fourth batter was a little overanxious and popped up an easy fly, which was taken care of by Shorty Jones.

It was an anxious moment when Peters, the Morningsides' crack batter, rose lazily from the bench and strolled with a confident air to the plate.

"It's all over but the shouting!" yelled the Morningside coach. "Here's where Petey brings two men home!"

But there was no answering yell from the stand.

The crack pitcher missed the cheer that should have greeted him, and he looked around in surprise. But there were no eyes for him just then.

A shriek of delight from big Mac brought everybody up standing. And next moment the big Scotchman was performing a wild dance with a dilapidated figure that had burst upon the scene.

"It's Jim!" he shouted, hugging the youth, whose tattered clothes and scratched face bore little resemblance to the spick-and-span captain of the Lincolns.

Big Mac's yells precipitated instant confusion. From catcher to outfield the Lincolns swarmed around. Then a mighty shout went up:

"Bradley! Bradley! Bradley!"

Poor Jim! This hugging and handshaking and thumping on the back was almost as severe as his experience of the last twenty hours. But he bore it with a huge grin that blotted out the scratches.

"I've lifted the hoodoo, Mac. How's the game?" he asked.

"Three to nothing in favor of the Morningsides," said big Mac ruefully.

"But it'll be thirty to three in favor of Lincolns in about a minute!" cried Shorty Jones, and he turned a dozen cart wheels to work off his ecstasy.

"Batter up!" yelled the umpire—he had been yelling it for some time, but nobody heard him in the din. The stand was in an uproar, for the word had gone around that this tattered figure was the captain and pitcher of the Lincoln Seminary nine.

Peters was still waiting at the plate when Jim grabbed a ball, and, with the permission of the Morningside captain, proceeded to warm up by throwing a few at big Mac, who had now donned the catcher's mask.

"Batter up!"

Peters bent over the willow and waited for the chance to add two more points to the score.

Jim glanced around and noted with satisfaction the intent look on the faces of the wearers of the orange and black of old Lincoln. He stuck his brass-tipped shoe into the rubber plate and nodded, as big Mac, his eyes sparkling behind the wire meshes of his mask, gave the signal.

Jim's right arm swung in a semicircle. The ball leaped forward with a slight inward curve across the batter's shoulders and landed *ker-plunk* in the Scotchman's big mitt.

"Strike one!" called the umpire.

"Look out there, Pete! Don't let him do it again!" came from the stand.

Peters looked sheepish. But his muscles tautened, he slammed the bat on the plate viciously, and made a wild lunge at the next ball. It might have been a home run if he had hit it; but he had miscalculated the speed of the horsehide. Jim had sent in a slow one that fooled Peters completely.

There was a volley of widely different comments from the stand:

"Pete's gone to sleep over the bat!"

"The pitcher in the tramp suit's got him scared."

"Stop your foolin', Pete! It's dangerous."

"What's the matter with Bradley?" bellowed a mighty voice.

"*He's* all right!" It seemed that everybody joined in the response, for the youth in the tattered clothing had been jeered unmercifully while he was warming up, but now the tide of popular favor had turned in his direction.

Peters looked angry enough to have throttled the pitcher. He bit his lip till it bled, while he eyed the bedraggled-looking figure in the box.

"I'll get the next!" he hissed. And get it he did, but so weakly, so ineffectually that he was easily beaten to first.

A torrent of uproarious excitement was let loose in the Lincoln stronghold, and the air was rent with cheers. The game which so far had been comparatively tame began to be of compelling interest.

There was a very serious confab among the Morningsides, and every man on the team was evidently on his mettle when plucky Bob Willis stepped to the home plate to do battle for the Lincolns.

Willis got as far as second base—and died there. Thomas was pitching a splendid game for the Morningsides, and the fielders were keyed up to do their mightiest.

During the Lincolns' inning Jim had found time to get into a baseball suit, and when he appeared togged out in the familiar orange and black he got a big cheer.

He smiled response—but it was a very wan smile, for two of his most reliable men had been retired on strikes; and a few minutes later came the umpire's call:

"Batter's out!"

"That ends the sixth," muttered Jim dolefully, shedding his sweater. "Well, there's three more left. Fellows," he said, as they gathered around him, "if we're going to win this game, we've got to play like demons."

"We'll do it, Jim!" they declared heartily.

"All right," he responded. "It's up to you."

The seventh and eighth innings developed into a duel between the two pitchers, and neither side was able to get a man past second base. In the last inning, the Morningsides got a man on third after two were out; but Peters, the star batter of the Morningsides, was up, and the rooters felt sure he was equal to the task of bringing them home.

Jim's curves, however, were too much for Peters, and, after taking three swings, which only dented the atmosphere, he threw the bat down in disgust and went into the field.

The Lincolns were now at the bat for their last inning. Jones, the Lincolns' diminutive shortstop, was up first. When he stepped to the plate, Thomas, the Morningside pitcher, gave him the merry laugh, and somebody on the stand yelled:

"He got you twice already, Shorty. Here's where you take your third dose."

Smarting under the jibes of the high-school rooters, Shorty had hard work to refrain from rapping out an angry retort; but he kept himself well in hand and waited, with his nerves a-tingle, for the first ball.

It came with plenty of velocity, but he judged it to a nicety, and brought the stand up yelling as he smashed the horsehide on the trade-mark.

The ball kept close to the ground, just out of the reach of all the fielders. It was good for two bases, and Shorty got to second safely. This wiped the smile from the face of Thomas, and made the Morningsides rather uneasy.

When Edwards—Jim's roommate—went to the bat, the pitcher was in a

serious mood. Edwards singled to right, and before Nelson could return the ball, Jones, the short one, had slid over the plate with the Lincolns' first run. The cheers of the Lincoln team were enthusiastic and tremendous, and Shorty was hailed as a hero.

Ewards went to second base on the throw-in. Reggie Moran was passed to first on four wide ones, Thomas betraying that he was rattled. Moran and Edwards then worked a double-steal. Bateson was thrown out at first, and the tension on both sides was fairly sizzling.

Jim Bradley himself was the next man up. He was cool and confident—for hadn't he lifted the hoodoo? What was there to fear now? The game was bound to be Lincoln's.

Now pitchers, as a rule, are indifferent batters, but Thomas was soon aware that the rival pitcher before him was one of the exceptions, and he tried with might and main to get Bradley on strikes. But Jim waited until he got one that suited him; then—bang!—away went the ball!

Jim sprinted with all the speed he could work up and reached third. The two men on the bases had scored, and evened the game up. There was now only one man out; but Hudson, the next batter, was weak with the club.

A hush had fallen over the field and the stand. Not a flag waved. Not a voice was heard. In dead silence they waited the outcome of the next moment of play. The suspense was heart-breaking.

Poor little Hudson! He felt the responsibility of his position, and his heart was pounding like a trip hammer against his ribs. But glancing over at third base he caught a friendly nod from Jim Bradley that gave him courage.

He wasn't much of a bunter, but Jim had given him the signal for a squeeze play, and, gritting his teeth, he dropped the first ball pitched in front of the plate. Thomas swooped down on it like a hawk after its prey. He threw the ball to the catcher with all the energy he could command; but, quick as he was, Jim Bradley was quicker, and slid over the pan with the run that won the game.

The play was close, and Thomas sent up a shout.

The umpire waved him aside.

"Bradley was safe by a foot," he declared.

Then—if you take big Mac's word for it—everybody went stark, staring mad. Out over the field fluttered the orange and black. Cheer followed cheer, and in the midst of it the Lincolns sang a glory song.

Jim Bradley was, of course, the hero of the hour. He was thumped and pounded enthusiastically, and he just barely escaped a mob of pretty girls rushing upon him with pennants waving wildly in the summer air.

Big Mac and Shorty Jones were especially eager to hear about the crow-hunting expedition; and, surmising that it would be a long and interesting story, they hoisted Jim on to the home bench and made him tell the yarn to the crowd.

Chief among the rooters was a lanky, sandy-complexioned man dressed in a gray uniform. He listened attentively while the Lincoln captain told his remarkable story, beginning with the crow on the home plate.

When Jim ended, the man in uniform squirmed through the crowd, and, putting his hand on the jubilant youngster's shoulder, whispered in his ear:

"Ma young freend, I would speak wi' ye tae one side."

Flushed with victory, and having his mind on nothing but the game up to this point, Bradley had not noticed the man in uniform. His heart sank within him as he recognized that this was one of the park keepers—perhaps one of the very men who had given him such an eventful chase the night before.

"It's all up with me now," muttered the young pitcher, under his breath, seeing no chance of escape. So, while the rest of the team ran off to the pavilion, Jim followed the man in the gray uniform, who led him a hundred yards away to where a clump of trees hid them from view of the ball field.

"Weel, weel, ye done braw, laddie," he said, a twinkle in his eyes. "Yer story o' last nicht is fit tae put intil a story book. But, laddie, the next time ye want a craw frae the park, come tae me aforehand. I'm Robbie MacLean's uncle."

"What! The park superintendent?" exclaimed Jim.

The lanky Scotchman in uniform nodded. "Twa o' my men chased ye last nicht, and, noo that I ha'e seen ye get around the bases, I dinna wonder ye got awa' frae them. Is this wee bit weapon yours?"

He held out to Jim's astonished gaze a revolver, and pointed to the name engraved on the butt.

It was Jim's name. Denial was out of the question. It was the trusty gun that had lifted the hoodoo; but Jim's wild rush to get away from his pursuers had jerked it from his pocket, and the superintendent had found it while making his usual rounds.

Jim hung his head. Looming in front of him he saw a heavy fine or imprisonment. Never mind—hadn't the Lincolns won? There was plenty of consolation in the thought.

"And maybe this belongs tae ye as weel," continued big Mac's uncle. He opened a huge fist, and Jim, looking down into the great palm saw—his beloved Chinese coin, which he thought he had lost forever.

Jim pounced upon it eagerly. "Where did you find it?" he asked.

"Under the tree where the park craws ha'e their nests," was the response, and the sandy-complexioned officer looked accusingly at the youngster.

"There's a braw fine, or even jail, for laddies that carry revolvers," he said. "And there's mair o' a fine for laddies that shoot craws in th' park. But I'm no going tae press the charge. I'll forgi'e ye this time."

Jim was profuse in his thanks, and he clutched his coin tightly, determined never to lose it again—for he was convinced that it was responsible for this piece of good luck.

"Ye neednae thank me sae muckle," protested the big Scotchman. "I'm Robbie's uncle, ye know; and I'm a guid bit o' a fan mysel'—though I am a Heelandman. Hoot, mon! the way the Morningsides walloped the ball when puir Robbie was in the box made me feel sorry for the laddie. But when ye came intil the game, I whooped it up, for Robbie was avenged. I didna eare then if ye had kilt a *score* o' the park craws! But in the future, laddie, be vera keerful and dinna shoot ony mair birdies—unless ye hap tae find anither craw on the home plate!"

THE END.

Tommy's mother had made him a present of a toy shovel, and sent him out to play with his baby brother. "Take care of baby, now," said his mother, "and don't let anything hurt him."

Presently screams of anguish from baby sent the distracted parent flying to see what was the matter.

"For goodness' sake, Tommy, what has happened to the baby?" said she, trying to soothe the wailing infant.

"There was a naughty fly biting him on the top of his head, and I killed it with the shovel," was the proud reply.

Brown and Jones agreed to have a fishing competition. Jones fished with a live minnow and Brown with a worm.

After about four hours had elapsed, Brown sprang to his feet in great excitement, shouting he had got a bite.

His friends crowded round anxiously.

Then, with a mighty swish he landed on the bank Jones' minnow, which, becoming tired and hungry, had swallowed Brown's worm.

"What is the Miller family doing now?"

"The wife is writing poems that nobody will read, the daughter is painting pictures that nobody will buy, the son is composing plays that nobody will put on the stage, and the husband is writing checks that nobody will cash."

TOW-HEAD MURCHISON

By W. S. STORY

How He "Put a Crimp" in the Rascals

Irrepressible, volatile Tow-Head—you can't help liking him, and you'll pardon his slang; doubtless you'll chuckle over it. You'll rejoice over his escape from the burning steamer, on which he was basely abandoned, and you'll feel like shouting when he finally gets square with the arch plotter, old oily Porter.

Young Murchison, Sturtevant & Pearson's tow-headed office boy, came down the flight of stairs to the street with a rush, and, like a projectile from a twelve-inch gun, shot into the narrow street and into the April air and sunshine. He had a cigarette in his mouth, cocked upward at an angle of forty-five degrees, and in his soul an eagerness for the fun before him.

He was a long-legged boy, with broad, curving shoulders, a pear-shaped face, dotted with sixteen thousand freckles, which gave him distinction, if not beauty, and a pair of blue eyes that served as mercury in a thermometer to indicate the state of the spirit within him.

Once in the street he started his long legs off at a pace like that of a cab horse with a burr under his tail.

The air was that of ideal April, warm, genial, promising of summer.

Tow-head saw visions as he swung away from work, visions of a back lot some distance uptown, where in a few minutes he expected to be warping outshoots, and ins, and spitballs to Wall-eye Donovan, the champion boy catcher in twenty-three blocks—which is fame; and his long legs, no matter how quickly one followed the other, had no chance to keep up with his desire.

"Robert!" The call came from a window of the building he had just left.

Tow-head was far enough down the street when he heard this not to hear it; but he was honest, he was interested in his business with the bond house, he had ambition, and he liked Mr. Pearson, the junior partner, whose voice he recognized. He halted. He said nothing, but when he turned around the cigarette had sagged ninety degrees and was drooping from his lips.

Mr. Pearson, leaning out of the window of the office on the second floor, held up a finger to him. The only places Tow-head heard his Christian name, Robert, were in the office and at his home. A youngster with a great mop of hair like his hasn't much chance of hearing his baptismal name elsewhere.

Tow-head, somewhat discontented, but a martyr to duty, half regretting his honesty in hearing Mr. Pearson's hail, and half proud of it, went back to the office, his swinging, eager stride changed to a half shuffle.

"Sorry to trouble you, Robert," said Mr. Pearson, as Tow-head entered the office.

"That's all right," returned Tow-head, "kind o' sorry I didn't have earache, that's all," he added, with an open grin.

"Earache?" said Mr. Pearson.

"Sure; always stuff my ears full of cotton then."

Mr. Pearson laughed.

The junior partner was a young man and a fine dresser, and, as Tow-head expressed it, was "all there"—meaning that it was difficult to pick flaws in his appearance or in his actions.

Tow-head emulated him more or less, even to the point of dress. They had different ideas of color combinations, however, and employed different tailors; so Tow-head's imitation was not too apparent.

"Sorry to trouble you," repeated Mr. Pearson. "I promised to send Mr. Porter his statement to-day, and I forgot it. I'd take it myself, but have an important engagement. I wish you'd take it over for me. I'll be much obliged to you."

"Glad t' do it for you, Mr. Pearson," said Tow-head honestly. "You mean Porter in South Street—ol' soft-soap, the gink with a mug like a beet and a tongue as smooth as butter in the middle o' July?"

"That's the gentleman," admitted Mr. Pearson, shutting down his roll-top desk and handing the boy an envelope with the statement.

"That guy's so smooth," said Tow-head, "that he'll slip some day. I bet he has to hold his right hand with his left so it won't swipe his watch."

"I think you plumb the gentleman's character," said Mr. Pearson, rather grimly. "But never mind that. We don't expect all our clients to be angels, my boy. We're looking after money."

"Yes, sir. But you couldn't pry a dollar loose from Porter with a crowbar an' a stick o' dynamite."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not," said Mr. Pearson, smiling at the boy, whom he liked very much. "Well, good afternoon, and much obliged to you." The junior partner went to the door. He turned back. "The days are long now, Robert," he said, "and you'll get uptown in time to play ball. Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Pearson."

Mr. Pearson left the office, and Tow-head followed to the street.

It was characteristic of the boy that he did not complain over the ill luck that had found him within hearing of Mr. Pearson's call.

When he reached the street the second time, the cigarette—what was left of it—was uptilted again.

He started off for South Street, whistling. Nineteen is a fine age, finest in life almost. It sheds troubles and worries as a brand-new thirty-dollar raincoat sheds April rain. It's the time when we don't know anything, and are cocksure we know all there is worth knowing. Tow-head was nineteen, and while he was a modest youth, he had the brass and assurance that make a fellow of his age the loadstone for boots on itching feet.

Tow-head had never visited Mr. Porter's office; but, having a tongue in his head—and plenty of it—he did not lose much time in finding it. He was whistling a merry waltz as he rapped on the door.

"Come in!" a loud, smooth voice called, in response to his impatient tattoo. Tow-head entered the office without loss of time, still whistling.

The room in which he found himself was a dingy square apartment, devoid of carpeting. There were great files of dusty papers and periodicals along the walls, and piles of papers on the floor. There was nothing to tell him the nature of Porter's business. There was a desk near a dirty window opposite the entrance, and at this desk sat Mr. Porter.

Mr. Porter was a stout, red-faced gentleman, almost bald, save for a fringe of reddish hair on each side of his pate, suggesting an inclosure for flies. He was a smug-looking old chap, near the seventy mark, but hale and hearty, looking twenty years younger. He had large soulful eyes. He was dressed in black, and across his waistcoat hung a watch chain as big as a ship's hawser.

Mr. Porter was leaning back in his

chair, his arms folded across his stomach—Tow-head wondered whether he was in distress—with his fingers interlocked, perhaps each restraining the other from temptation.

"Good afternoon, young man," he said, a smile going over his face like oil over smooth water.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Porter," returned Tow-head, looking the man over with very scant favor. "I got a statement for you from Sturtevant & Pearson."

Advancing, he held out the envelope.

"Yes—thank you exceedingly," said Mr. Porter, unlocking his hands and accepting the proffered statement. "You were whistling when you came in?" He looked up with his unctious smile.

Tow-head stared at him. The man's fat, red, oily face, somehow or other suggested a great juicy beefsteak—rare. The boy nodded at the interrogation.

"Let me see," said Mr. Porter, studying the lad covertly a moment and then looking at him frankly, "I've seen you before. Yes, yes, certainly—in the office of Sturtevant & Pearson. You look very strong." The big eyes widened and even watered in their admiration.

"I can lift twelve hundred pounds," said Tow-head, without a blush. He did not relish the insinuating flattery of the suave gentleman.

"I have no doubt of it," said Mr. Porter. He did not blush, either, but his eyes glittered in a peculiar way. Like all mean and vain men, Mr. Porter fiercely resented gibing; and he knew the youngster did not like him and was purposely lying.

"You read the Good Book, young man?" he said.

"Yes, sir," returned the boy, with mock meekness.

"You know of Samson, then? He was very strong. Ten thousand men he slew with the jawbone of an ass."

"Say, Mr. Porter," gravely interjected Tow-head, who saw no reason for this kind of talk and had no patience with it, "can you tell me how many times limburger cheese is mentioned in the Bible. That's pretty strong. An' the Bible says Delilah was the cheese! Of course a jawbone——" he stopped suddenly, and looked down at Mr. Porter.

With a shining eye, Mr. Porter was reading his statement.

"This is quite correct," he said, at length, looking up with face as bland and oily as ever. "By the way, young man, would you do me a very great favor? I shall not fail to make proper mention of your complaisance."

"Oh, sure," said Tow-head, very quickly; and if Mr. Porter caught the note of sarcasm in his tone and words he did not show that he did. "Where's your broom?"

Mr. Porter's smile increased, or, as it were, deepened.

"I merely want you to take a note to Captain Angell, or the steamer *Aphrodite*. I'll pay you twenty-five cents for your trouble."

It was business policy, of course, to be polite to his firm's clients, so Tow-head restrained the words that flew to his tongue and said he would be glad to accommodate.

Mr. Porter motioned him to a chair some distance from his desk, and, turning, wrote a note with great deliberation.

Tow-head, ostentatiously dusting the chair indicated, sat down and awaited the man's pleasure. He had given up the ball playing for that afternoon, and, therefore, time was of no object to him.

Mr. Porter turned around as he sealed his note, and bestowed upon him his blandest smile. "I'm sure your firm has in you, my dear young sir, a very valuable person," he said, as he tendered the envelope.

"That's what they say every time they raise my salary," returned the boy.

"I have no doubt of it, no doubt at all. True merit will win," quoth Porter, rubbing his fat hands slowly together—"will tell, will conquer always. You will rise, young man, if you apply yourself unremittingly to your labors. I am sure you are one who will work hard and with all your heart in any walk of life in which it is meant for you to labor."

"Yes, sir—t'anks," said Tow-head, with contempt. He openly held out his hand.

Mr. Porter shook it heartily.

Tow-head, after rubbing his hand on his trousers, held it out again.

"Please jar a quarter loose, Mr. Porter."

"Bless my soul! bless my soul! I forgot," explained the old gentleman, spreading more oil of good humor upon his florid countenance. He produced a little purse and paid out the quarter. "The laborer is worthy of his hire," he said, as he parted painfully with the money. "I thank you very much. Good afternoon."

"Sure he is," said Tow-head, "an' sometimes more. Anyway, gasoline comes high, and I need the money. Good night."

Tow-head left the office at once. When he reached the street he stepped to the curb and spat—just once. It was an expression of his contempt for the old miser and hypocrite he had left upstairs.

Mr. Porter, for his part, peered out the window and saw the boy striding down the street. "He is one who will work hard—very hard," he muttered, "and I think he *is* going to work hard. Anyway, he's a fine specimen for a green one."

He smiled as always, and, seating himself, folded his hands over his stomach, and, like a great spider, sat staring into vacancy, perhaps waiting or projecting intricate webs; and his big, soulful eyes were watery with his grin.

Tow-head was familiar with the water front, and he readily found Pier 23½. Slipping through a fence, which made a pretense of barring ingress, he walked down the long, dilapidated wooden pier.

At her berth lay the *Aphrodite*. She was a single-deck steamer of some fifteen hundred tons. She was riding high out of the water, and her line, when in cargo, showed five feet above tide. Her hull was rusty black above the line; her cabins and rails were dirty white, with a bit of faded gold here and there; and she had a single smokestack, painted red, with a white stripe about the top above the siren, which was cocked abaft at a rakish angle, like a stovepipe hat on the head of an old reveler.

Tow-head could see plainly enough that preparations for sailing were going on, although he decided that if she were to sail she was certainly going without much cargo.

He scrambled aboard amidships, having to make a climb of it, as her rail was above the level of the wharf and the steamer was free and riding a foot from her mooring. He could hear the hoarse chugg-chugg of her engines, and the panting of a near-by tug.

A sailor came along at this juncture, and the lad accosted him.

"Say," he said, "I'm looking for Cap'n Angell. Is he on board here?"

"Looking for a berth, mate?" asked the sailor, eying with disgust the youngster in black and white check suit, clean collar, and red necktie.

"Naw," returned Tow-head, with an open grin, "I got a message for him from a fat, smooth guy in South Street. I ain't looking for a job—I'm president of a bank now, an' that keeps me busy an' in spendin' money."

The sailor, a sodden chap of middle age, was silent a moment, scanning the youngster. Then he said quickly: "Kin yer jump that, kid?" He pointed to the space between the free-riding steamer and the pier. It was nothing short of seven feet. "If yer can," he added shortly, "do it."

"T'ank you—why?" said Tow-head.

The sailor shrugged his shoulders, and, making no response, shuffled forward.

Tow-head was now aware that the *Aphrodite* was being warped out into the stream by the hoarse-panting tug he had heard. The pier was slipping by, faster and faster, and in a few moments the vessel was clear of the slip, the pier quite beyond reach. Tow-head felt the importance of finding the captain and delivering his message in time to return to the tug.

He made his way to port at once, and came upon Angell up forward. He recognized the man as captain at once. The master was dressed in a faded uniform, with tarnished gold braid. He looked seedy. On his lapel were grease stains. Yet he had an air of authority that marked him as the man to whom the note was addressed.

Angell was a heavily built, red-faced man. His eyes were mild, but they were set somewhat askew, and they were shifty. He struck the boy as a faded-out, weak reproduction of Mr. Porter, of South Street. He had the same oily, sanctimonious air and the same smile.

"Cap'n Angell?" queried Tow-head, stepping up to him at once as he turned to see who came.

The captain, who had been gazing astern as if he saw visions above the jagged, monster sky line of the city, looked at him and blandly smiled, his eyes alternately twinkling with an effect somewhat like that of a revolving light tower.

"Yes," answered the captain, at length. "What can I do for you, young man? Ever been to sea before?"

"I got a message for you from Mr. Porter," said the boy, promptly and impatiently. He made a motion toward his breast pocket.

The captain spoke up at once, his smile broader and blander than before.

"Yes, yes. I know. Come below an' I'll talk with you."

"I want to go back on that tug there, captain."

"You shall go, certainly; it'll wait for you. They always wait for passengers. Mr. Smith"—he called softly to another man near by, likewise clad in a faded, seedy uniform, who was leaning on the rail and spitting into the waters purling under the quarter—"don't let that tug get away without Mr. Porter's messenger."

"No, sir," returned the man, looking around. As Captain Angell and the boy went below, his coarse face relaxed in a grin.

Even as Tow-head followed the captain below, the *Aphrodite's* engines began to throb. The steamer was under way. The tug, having cast off her line, whistled hoarsely three times, dropped astern, and started back.

Tow-head felt the steamer's vibration and heard the tug's farewell, but thought nothing of either.

The cabin into which Captain Angell preceded him showed signs of former elegance; but it looked then very faded and time-worn. Still, everything was spick and span below, as it was on deck, and every bit of brass shone like polished mirrors.

"Don't say a word, young man," said the captain, when they were below; "I know Mr. Porter's message."

His manner was such that Tow-head was angered, and he did not take out the message.

"What'd he send me for, then?" exclaimed the boy. "Well, say," he cried suddenly, feeling the increased vibration of the steamer and the movement that told him she was under her own steam, "I want to get out o' here!"

Without thought of Porter's note, which Angell fancied a mere trumped-up message to put the boy on the vessel—his experience in such matters being wide—Tow-head turned and ran up the companionway to the deck.

The *Aphrodite* was speeding down the harbor, and the tug was lost to sight amid the craft astern and the dark background of city and shipping.

Captain Angell came up and stood beside the boy as he looked angrily back.

"Gracious!" he exclaimed, as he winked at the mate, who had come aft while he was below with Tow-head. "Mr. Smith," he said, "I requested you to detain the tug for this young man."

"Very sorry, sir," said Mr. Smith, "but they got away before I knew it. Cut right out and left us before I could say a word."

Tow-head looked from one man to another. Neither was prepossessing.

"Where'll you put me off?" he asked.

"I regret this very much," said Captain Angell, with his slippery, bland smile; "but I'll put over a boat when we get down to the Narrows, and pay your fare back. I'm very sorry to inconvenience you."

"All right," said Tow-head. He wanted to believe that the captain meant this, but he was now decidedly suspicious. He knew well enough that they could have held the tug if they had wished. What their object in detaining him on board was he did not at that moment realize.

Captain Angell and Mr. Smith, the mate, leaving him, stalked off together.

Tow-head looked after them with a queer expression. He said nothing, however, but he did more or less thinking. He was not taken with the two sea dogs. To his mind they were a pair of rascals.

The *Aphrodite* once had been a swift vessel, and there was still speed in her. She hummed down the harbor at a ten-knot clip, and at dusk she was in the Narrows.

Tow-head, impatiently awaiting this place, sought for Angell, and he came upon him as the captain descended from the pilot house.

"Say, cap'n," he said, with some vehemence, his eyes sparkling with indignation, "ain't this the Narrows?"

The captain eyed the boy a moment without speaking, and a broad grin crossed his beefy, ill-favored visage—went over it merely from habit.

"You soup-fed, mangy son of a sea cook," he said fiercely, "don't you ever speak to me again 'less you're spoke to first!"

Tow-head was not as much surprised at this outburst as might be supposed. The captain was merely showing himself as he had made him out.

"You said you'd put me over here, didn't you?" flared the boy, his own tone fierce.

"Yes—an' by Jupiter! I *will* put you overboard here if you give me any of your lip."

Tow-head still barred Captain Angell's way. "Want a regular society knock-down, don't you? Say! I'm wise to you, all right. You're shanghaing me. I got a note for you from Porter up in South Street that's important, he said; but you don't get it—you crook!"

As he spoke, his voice ringing angrily, his eyes snapping, Tow-head put his hand in his inside pocket, drew out an envelope, and tearing it straight across, threw the bits overboard.

"Dog rot your soul," bellowed Angell, leaping forward, but not in time to save the letter, "take that!"

That was intended to be a blow full in the face. Tow-head, however, was skillful with his hands, and courageous, and at that moment very angry. Ducking the blow, he planted a clinched fist in Angell's face.

The doughty seaman went down like a candle pin, sprawling on the deck. He called lustily for Smith, and the mate came running from forward in time to see his superior getting to his feet.

"Kill the little shrimp!" roared Angell—"kill him!" His face flamed red as fire. "Kill him!" he bawled furiously.

The two men bore down simultaneously upon the boy. Tow-head, now alarmed, and with good cause, turned tail before them and fled. Without knowing just how he got there, he found himself, in a few minutes, down below, ensconced in the dark behind tiers of boxes and among cordage and divers other odds and ends. Although the men hunted him, he remained undiscovered. They probably did not trouble much, knowing that hunger and thirst would bring him out in good time.

That night was one of agony to the boy. He did not doubt that Angell would actually kill him if he got an opportunity while in his rage, and he did not care to go on deck.

Outside the Narrows, the *Aphrodite* rolled all night in a nasty cross sea, and Tow-head, very dismal indeed, lay in his hiding place listening to the creaking and straining of the vessel's timbers, and now and then adding his groans to the groaning of the old hulk.

When morning came, he did not know. His seasickness had been very slight, and he was ravenously hungry. He must venture out to get something to

eat, and warily he made his way to the deck.

It was a gray, cold morning. The sea was choppy and the wind was keen. The *Aphrodite* was running down the Jersey coast under full steam, and, being merely in ballast, she danced like a cockleshell and bucked in an uncomfortable fashion.

Stealthily, Tow-head crept about, and in the cabin aft he came to a table set with breakfast and with no one about. He judged it to be Angell's breakfast, but saw no signs of the captain.

With a careful look about, he went down into the cabin, without ceremony laying to upon the ready meal. He was tossing down a second cup of coffee when a step sounded at the foot of the companionway. He looked up, now bold as a pet pig in a farmer's sacred front room. A full and satisfied stomach has much to do with courage, and breakfast had stiffened the office boy's backbone.

Angell was in the doorway, glaring at him with bulging, staring eyes, his fat face mottled with anger.

"Good morning, cap'n," said Tow-head calmly. "Come in." He got to his feet at once, retaining the heavy coffee cup in his hand.

"Good morning," returned the captain thickly, "what yer doing?"

"Eatin' my breakfast. You don't feed very good on this floating junk heap. Yer cook's bum!"

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed the captain, "you've et up my breakfas'!" His voice of blended rage and astonishment was very comical. He strode forward in his wrath. This boy, this young sculpin, had eaten *his*—the *captain's*—breakfast!

"You come a step nearer, cap'n," cried Tow-head, in sudden warning, raising the cup as if about to deliver a swift inshoot, "an' I'll bust yer block like a Dutch cheese!"

Angell, who had been slowly advancing upon him, halted very promptly, and as he regarded the boy he thoughtfully plucked at his blunt chin.

"Say, see here, son," he said at length, "you tell me what Porter said in that note, an' I'll land you anywhere you say. You know what it was, don't you?"

"Sure," returned Tow-head at once.

The captain had deceived him, and he felt quite justified in employing deceit to gain his liberty. "But," he added, in a moment, "I ain't going to tell you till you put me ashore."

"All right, that's fair," said Captain Angell smoothly. "It's all right." He turned.

"Hold on there!" cried the boy. "You don't go out now! Call that pig-faced mate of yours!"

The "pig-faced mate" chanced at this moment to be coming down to take his place at table with the captain.

"Tell him to keep out," commanded the boy, as he noted the mate. He menaced the master with the heavy coffee cup. "Tell him to make landing at the first place he can in the next half hour, an' you and I'll keep company here till we land."

The mate, intensely indignant at the spectacle he beheld, sprang down the little stairway in a bull-like rush for the boy.

Tow-head, turning, took deliberate aim and, with the might of a strong pitcher's arm, hurled the cup at Smith. The *Aphrodite* at the instant of throwing, however, rolled down an unusually big wave, and the coffee cup, in consequence, missed the mate and broke against the wall in atoms.

The mate was upon him then, and Tow-head, although lithe and strong, was no match for the burly sailor, who presently had him down, with his great fingers clutching at his throat.

Mastered in this wise, the boy had sense enough to cease struggling. In a moment or two he was bound with sailor-like thoroughness, unable to move hand or foot.

The mate, arising with a grunt from the operation of tying, kicked the lad savagely into a corner.

"What yer goin' to do with the little devil, cap'n?" inquired Mr. Smith. "Drop him overboard?"

"Can you make a sailor of him?" returned Angell, with a grin. "He's pretty strong." His shifty eyes twinkled, and the mate, who had been obliged to exert his full strength in mastering the youngster, felt the mockery in his superior's words.

"Guess I can," he said, with an oath and a savage glare at Tow-head. "I'd like to try."

"Then that's your job," said Angell shortly. "Ring the bell for grub. The little rat et up my breakfas'! Where's that infernal black louse?"

The steward, a poor, half-witted negro lad of twenty or so, answered the ring, and Angell bawled orders at him with profane emphasis.

"Yes, sir," said Angell, "that little sculpin et up my breakfas'."

"The blazes he did!" exclaimed the mate. He burst into hoarse laughter, and looked at Angell with amusement, thinking of the predicament in which he had found him—held up by a boy with a coffee cup! And Captain Angell knew he was thinking of that, and didn't like it.

In a short time the two officers of the *Aphrodite* were at table together, eating breakfast. They talked in low tones, and Tow-head could make out nothing of what they said. Smith ended the talk by arising abruptly from the table and approaching the boy. He pulled Tow-head out into the middle of the cabin and cut his bonds.

"Now," he bellowed, "stand up, you blamed freckled-faced swine!" He emphasized his order with a brutal kick.

Tow-head arose—very quickly—and he said nothing. Resistance he knew would be worse than useless.

"I'm goin' t' make a sailor out o' you," cried the mate, leering at him. He looked forward to the task with enjoyment.

"You see, young man," said Angell, "it's impossible to make a landing just now." His evil face was set in a wide oily grin. "We'll have to ask you to work your passage." Angell was brutal, in fact worse than his mate in sheer cruelty; but he had a way of talking and a way of acting as if he were the most tender-hearted and considerate of men.

Smith grunted contemptuously. He was an out-and-out blackguard, and hated Angell's ways.

"I s'pose," said Tow-head coolly, "I'm shanghaied. I s'pose Porter sent me down to your pier on purpose, didn't he?"

"He knew we were short-handed," returned the captain.

"Of course he did," grunted Smith. "You ain't the first, either. Porter's the smoothest crimp in New York."

"Well," said Tow-head grimly, "I'll put a crimp in him before I'm through."

"Come, come," said Captain Angell, his shifty eyes twinkling. "You mustn't bear malice. 'Tain't Christian. You'll have a pleasant job with us here, good pay, easy work, and nice company."

Tow-head grinned at the mate—who returned the grin.

Mr. Smith, besides grinning back at the victim, grunted dismally. "Yes, I'm well," he snapped, when Angell asked him whether he felt ill.

"Where yer bound?" queried Tow-head.

"Savannah," answered Angell.

"Well, it won't do me any good to make a fuss—now," said Tow-head. "I'll work."

"You're right," agreed the mate, hugely satisfied. "Now get for'ard," he cried suddenly, kicking him.

Tow-head, spurred on by a vigorous boot, hastened forward; and all day long he was busy at dirty, menial tasks. Smith delighted in driving him.

To get away was impossible, and Tow-head did not know whether they were bound for Savannah, as the captain had declared. They might in reality be bound for a port on the other side of the globe.

He got neither sympathy nor information from the sailors. They were a sorry lot of coarse fellows, who did their work when watched and chewed tobacco with zeal all the time. They had no feeling for anybody or anything.

One night, however, relief and information came to the office boy in a very peculiar way, and with it full sat-

isfaction against both Angell and Porter, of South Street.

When he turned in, he took off his coat, the air being close below. As he rolled up the garment for a pillow, a sealed envelope fell from the inside pocket, and when he picked it up he saw, to his astonishment, that it was Porter's message to Captain Angell. It would seem that he had taken from his pocket and thrown into the sea a letter of his own. Without compunction, he opened Porter's letter, and upon reading it he danced a brief jig of joy. He turned in with a light heart. One thing the note told him was that the *Aphrodite* was really en route for Savannah, and if he didn't make a good French leave there he could blame himself.

It must have been one o'clock when he awoke with a queer medley of sounds in his ear. The siren was screaming without cessation, the engines thunderously beat and thrummed, and men were scurrying about on deck and shouting. He could hear the rattling of chains and the creaking of rusty falls.

Looking about in the light of the lantern swinging from a hook above, Tow-head saw that he was alone. For a few moments he lay listening to the unusual sounds. The footsteps and shouts finally ceased. Jumping up from his bunk, he donned his coat and ran up to the deck.

The *Aphrodite* was plunging ahead under full steam, and from her cabin aft a great pillar of smoke and a shaft of flame shot upward. It was as light as day within a radius of two hundred yards, a circle of yellow in an ink-black night.

The steamer was afire, and the flames, aided by the wind, roared like a foundry furnace. The deck was deserted, and in a moment or two, as the fire burst through the cabin roof, leaping up as high as the siren with its vomit of steam, he could discern two boats some distance to starboard.

"Take me off!" he roared. "Hey! Take me off!" He ran to the rail and bellowed his appeal through hands formed trumpetwise.

They may not have heard, but the rowers undoubtedly saw his form in the light of the fire. But no attention was given to his hail.

Suddenly he ran up into the pilot house, the door of which was swinging in the wind. Grasping the wheel, he jammed it hard to starboard. The *Aphrodite* bucked and plunged in the choppy sea, but her nose came around in good response, although she kicked up a great spray. Tow-head held her hard, and headed her directly where he supposed the land to be.

The old hooker, the fire roaring from her bowels aft, jumped off, rolling lightly in the ground swell, and Tow-head soon realized he was bearing directly down upon the men who had deserted him. He could see the sailors look back at the blazing hulk rushing upon them. Now they shouted and waved to him. The boy had half a mind to run them down. Frantically for their lives the rowers pulled out of his course, and he bore on without a turn of the wheel.

In a short time the *Aphrodite* came to and grounded on a sand bar, shivering in every timber, and, from the fire, shooting up a mighty shower of sparks and a greater volume of flame and smoke.

In the light of the fire he could see the shore, which was not far distant, and he struck out for it lustily. He was a good swimmer, and he had no difficulty in gaining the sandy beach.

Once ashore, he sat down, and, with hands clasped about his knees, watched the burning steamer—and, without words, was thankful for his escape. In a few moments the *Aphrodite* was enveloped in flames, and she made a magnificent sight. Her boilers finally burst with a mighty detonation, and the steamer went skyward in myriad bits of flaming wood.

In a few minutes after the explosion of the boilers, the two boats landed, coming in a few rods above Tow-head, who calmly strolled down to meet the crew.

"I beat yer in," he said coolly.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Captain Angell, "we forgot you—I swear we did."

"Oh, you called me all right," returned Tow-head. "I heard you. But I was busy packin' my trunk. Sorry I lost my job."

Captain Angell, a cautious man ashore, made no response, although he caught the boy's taunt, and Mr. Smith grunted.

"How near Savannah are we, Mr. Smith?" queried Angell.

"Walk o' four miles, I make it," returned the mate, very gruffly.

The mate was right. The walk was between four and five miles, and it was about half-past three in the morning when the crew of the *Aphrodite* prowled into the street of Savannah.

"By the way, cap'n," said Tow-head, who was himself now he was in a city, "will you lend me the price of a room? I s'pose you'll be glad to do that."

"Certainly," said Angell. "Glad to do it. Thunder! we forgot you. I can't get over that. But say, won't you come with us?"

"No—no, I thank you," returned Tow-head, with a laugh. There were several men and a policeman in the street, and he felt at ease.

Angell fished out a five-dollar bill, and, painfully, but silently, turned it over to the boy.

"An' say," said Tow-head genially, "would you mind comin' to the hotel with me? I'm timid at night."

"Glad to do so, my boy," returned Angell, after an exchange of glances with his mate, who by a nod indicated that in his opinion he had best watch the boy.

Tow-head, accompanied by his oily friend, the captain, secured a room in a first-class hotel; and after registering he invited the captain over to a writing desk.

"I'm goin' to write Mr. Porter right away," said the boy calmly, "an' tell him I couldn't deliver his message to you. I think he'll be as sorry as you."

"What d'ye mean?" queried Angell, his bland smile fading curiously.

"I mean I tore up the wrong letter the other day when we came through the Narrows, and to-night—or last night, rather—I found the one he gave me, and read it—*before our fire!* This is what he said." Backing away from the captain, Tow-head took out Porter's note and read:

"DEAR FRIEND ANGELL: Not between New York and Savannah. Insurance ran out yesterday, and I can't renew till next week—trouble with the underwriters. Look for letter from me in Savannah.

"The bearer of this is a dear young friend of mine, who wants to go to sea. I told him you might find a place for him. PORTER."

Captain Angell sputtered—his words were quite inarticulate. His face grew sallow. He choked and gasped, and his shifty eyes hardened. But there were men even then in the lobby, and he did not dare to commit the murder in his thought.

"I ain't goin' t' claim any wages for my work, cap'n," said Tow-head, slowly backing still farther from the sailor. "I figure I'm even with you. That'll help a little bit. Good-by! Shall I remember you to our dear friend, Mr. Porter?"

Angell, still sputtering, started blindly for the boy, changed his mind suddenly, turned, and in his excess of rage groped his way across the lobby and passed out into the street.

With a broad grin, Tow-head stood watching him till he disappeared.

"Now," he said, when the irate sailor had vanished, "I'll drop Porter a *billet-doux*. I guess it'll joggle him some." He sat down at the desk and, after writing brief notes to his mother, Mr. Pearson, and one other, scribbled off a letter to Porter, saying that he had failed to deliver his message to Captain Angell, and that, thinking it might be of interest to the district attorney, he had forwarded it to him for perusal.

"An' I guess that'll put a crimp in you," he muttered, as he dropped the letter into the mail box.

And, still smiling grimly, he followed the bellboy up to his room and went to bed.

THE END.

THE DEADWOOD TRAIL

By GILBERT PATTEN

A SERIAL ADVENTURE STORY

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

Lang Strong, the boy from Maine, arrives at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, in pursuit of his uncle, David Norton, whom he has never seen, and who has failed to keep an appointment to meet him in Cheyenne. Hearing Lang's story, Injun Jo, an old frontiersman and scout, bound for the Black Hills, agrees to accompany him. Lang attempts to ride the pinto pony of a blonde giant who calls himself Rattlesnake Jack Harper, succeeds after being once bucked off; but Jack then refuses to keep his agreement to swap horses with the lad. Bud and Barbara Blake, brother and sister, who are also anxious to hurry on, make friends with Lang and give him breakfast. The party of four set forth from the fort, Lang riding on the "jerky" wagon. They have not traveled far before Rattlesnake Jack overtakes them and forces his company upon them. At Rawhide Buttes they overtake a wagon train and Lang is dismayed by the cold reception given him by David Norton, with whom Rattlesnake Jack is on the most friendly terms. That night the boy sees his uncle cheating in a poker game. Norton is detected in his dishonesty and driven out of the camp, Lang and Jack going with him. Jack slips back and appropriates a horse, which he claims he won in the card game. They reach "Bowman's Ranch" on Hat Creek, and learn that the U. S. troops commanded by Gen. Terry are prosecuting a campaign against the hostile Sioux under Sitting Bull. Here David Norton is strangely mistaken for a person by the name of Brandon Rolfe. They again set forth alone, leading an old plainsman to say "it is a ten-to-one chance that none of them will ever again be seen a-wearin' the whole o' his ha'r." That night the three adventurers camp on the open plain, and in the morning Lang awakens to make the terrible discovery that he has been deserted. After wandering all day, near nightfall he sees two young Indians, who have Barbara Blake a captive. He heroically rescues the girl. They are found by Old Jo and Bud, and the quartette push on toward the Hills. They are overtaken and passed by a solitary horseman with one thumb, who shows great haste when told that the man who calls himself David Norton is doubtless somewhere ahead.

CHAPTER XV.

RELATING A CONVERSATION CONCERNING BAD MEN AND RUSTLERS WHICH OCCURRED AT A RANCH ON THE CHEYENNE.

The sun leaned to the west. The Red Cloud Trail lay far behind, but still the little party continued watchful, for they knew they would remain in peril of a possible Indian attack until they had reached their destination.

Old Jo was watching some faint dark specks circling high in the blue sky a considerable distance in advance.

"Them there air buzzards," he finally observed; "an' the 'pearance o' them birds jest nacherally means somethin'."

"That's so," agreed Bud, who had likewise taken note of the ill-omened birds. "It's right likely they're looking for a square meal."

"An' I sure opines they has located it," said the scout. "They've been hangin' there a consider'ble time, an' now they're settlin'. We may find clean-picked bones o' man or critter when we amble along."

"Injuns may have been at work there," said Bab.

"No tellin'," admitted the old plainsman. "Buzzards air not any p'tick'ler whatsomever, and they'd jest as soon make a feed off a human as ary other kind o' critter."

The buzzards were seen in the air, settling lower and lower, until the party had drawn much nearer the spot. The birds finally dropped down, but rose heavily from the body of some animal as the creaking wagon approached.

"It's a hoss," said Jo; "an' chaw me up if he ain't yet a-wearin' of a saddle! Findin' a dead hoss here with a saddle attached looks a heap bad."

They halted near the dead horse, old Jo dismounting to make an examination.

"What do you make of it?" asked Bud anxiously.

"Critter ain't been dead more'n two hours, I opine," was the answer. "Stepped in a gopher hole an' broke his foreleg; consequencely, bein' no further use, he gits a bullet in the head, and the gent with one thumb, what was a-ridin' him, moseys along afoot."

Now Lang had for some hours regretted the hasty departure of the stranger who had overtaken and passed them in such an exceeding hurry. When the man had passed quite beyond recall the boy was seized by a desire to broach a dozen perplexing questions which had arisen in his mind to bewilder and annoy him; but it was then too late, and he berated himself for his lack of ready wit. The words of old Jo now led him to ask anxiously:

"Are you sure this horse belonged to the man with one thumb?"

"Sartin," was the answer.

"Then we may overtake him," said Lang eagerly.

"Which is nohow unprobable," nodded the scout, as he twisted off another chew with his yellow teeth.

This prospect seemed to brighten and inspire the lad on the jerky, who was urgent to lose no time about proceeding; but Jo declared it a shame to abandon the saddle with the dead horse, and he deftly unloosed the cinch strap, dragged off the article it had held upon the animal's back, and flung it into the wagon.

They passed on, and behind them the disturbed buzzards again settled to resume the feast they had begun by pecking out the dead beast's eyes.

Night was spreading over the world when they came to the cottonwood-lined bank of the Cheyenne, on the far side of which was one of those lone ranches to be found at intervals along this dangerous trail through Indian land. The coming upon these ranches had ever given Lang a sensation of wonderment and surprise, for to him it seemed quite inexplicable that any one should venture to build them where they must always be exposed to the possibility of attack and destruction.

Although swollen by the recent rains, the river had already begun to subside. Yet it could not be passed without trouble and danger. Their anxiety, however, led them to attempt the crossing that night, and Jo picked the ford, leading the way into the rushing yellow water.

When nearly halfway across a quicksand came near precipitating disaster, but by vigorous use of whip and tongue Lang finally urged the weary horses to drag the jerky clear of the treacherous spot, and, though the water rose to the wagon bottom, the northern shore was attained without any great misadventure. For his success the young tenderfoot was rewarded by a word of approval from Injun Jo.

Three men had watched the fording of the river, standing in the gathering gloom in front of the log house. They proved to be a trio of old bordermen, to whom peril appeared quite as pleasant and as much sought after as is safety by the average person. Injun Jo was known to at least one of them, and all were made welcome at the ranch.

Lang lost little time in questioning these men; but, to his disappointment, they had seen nothing of the man with one thumb. The stranger who was in such a hurry to come up with Brandon Rolfe had not crossed the river at that point.

Old Jo listened to the boy's questions, and the answers received seemed to satisfy him a great deal more than they did Lang, who made no effort to hide his disappointment over the failure of his hope to meet again that night the man with one thumb and hold converse with him.

Whither had vanished the mysterious man who had so hurriedly appeared and disappeared in the midst of the Dakota waste? Buzzards were picking the bones of his horse; perhaps the man's

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scalp was dangling gory from a redskin's belt.

Lang felt that the vanishing of this man had taken away one means of solving a most annoying riddle. This, however, did not prevent him from enjoying at the ranch on the Cheyenne a very satisfying meal of cooked food, over which all sought to make cheerful.

The rough men treated Bab with the greatest respect, and she was as vivacious as a bird, impartially bestowing her smiles and nods on the weather-worn old fellows, though it seemed that for Lang the most charming pucker came into her dainty chin.

The flaring light of the great open fire threw a pleasant glow over the assemblage about the rough table, and caused their shadows to rise and shift on the smoky walls. The men spoke of Indians, prospectors, the rush into the Hills, the chances of fortune there, the Custer massacre, and a great many things to which Lang listened with absorbed interest.

"Deadwood shore is a right lively town," said one; "but it's goin' to be plumb overrid with gamblers an' crooked men o' the worst sort, an' no mistake about it."

"Two of which kind," observed another, "went along the trail past here yesterday mawnin' some lively, if we take for it the word of the pilgrims what were follering after."

"Them?" said the first. "Takin' the statement o' the parties what were arter 'em, that pair were hoss thieves as well as gamblers, an' rustlin' hosses is a-carryin' deviltry a leetle too fur, even yereabouts, as they're right sartin to find out."

"Whatever was the 'pearance o' these two rustlin' gents ye're mentionin', pards?" inquired Injun Jo, who, having finished his meal, now had swift recourse to his twist of black tobacco.

"One," was the answer, "were a strappin' big feller in fringed buckskin an' a high-peaked hat, while t'other were dark an' quiet-like, though he seemed to be the chief. I obsarved p'tic'ler the superfluity o' hosses, as they hed five, only three bein' needed, at most, an' they could 'a' got along right well with two."

"I 'low I knows 'em," nodded Jo, twisting about and spitting sizzlingly into the fire. "I was with the train at Rawhide Buttes when they rustled one o' them hosses. Thar was some trouble over a poker game, in which the two stood by to skin three pilgrims o' the train, the dark one dealin' crooked to his pard. The pilgrims savvied arter a while, an' then there were doin's, which ended when a committee from the train urged the sharps to mosey along by theirselves, their furder company not bein' needed, nohow, nor desired. They took the hint and ambled, but that night they slipped back an' cut out a hoss that had somehow figgered in the bettin' of the poker game, which irked the gent what owned the critter, he allowin' it had been won crooked—hadn't been won any at all, an' so the takin' of it were stealin'."

"An' that gent, with two others," said one of the frontiersmen, "came hikin' along here last night arter the sharps what had the hoss. Thar sartin will be tribulation when they all meet up."

This conversation proved far more interesting to Lang than any that had passed before, for it revealed to him the true light in which David Norton and Rattlesnake Jack were now regarded. He drew off by himself and slipped outside, wishing to be alone with his unpleasant thoughts. Sitting on the trunk of a felled tree and gazing disconsolately at the starlit bosom of the yellow Cheyenne, he meditated, asking himself some mightily unpleasant questions.

The conviction that his uncle was a crooked gambler had seemed unpleasant enough, but further insight into the man's character had shocked him beyond measure. And now it seemed that David Norton had been branded as a horse thief, and that he was being pursued by some determined men, who were bent on bringing him to such justice as that wild region dealt out to rustlers. To Lang the thought that such a man could be the brother of his mother was most painful and humiliating.

But how was it that more than one man had mistaken David Norton for a person known as Brandon Rolfe? One answer only to this question presented itself, and now it seemed to the boy that somewhere in the West Norton had lived and passed among men under the assumed name of Rolfe. Why this had been did not now appear, but Lang knew full well that oftentimes a man who has committed deeds of lawlessness finds it convenient, on passing from the scenes of his misdoings to other fields, to leave behind him his rightful name and assume another by which he is not so well known. Was it possible that some black deed of the past had led David Norton to change his name for a time? And now, as he was seeking to resume his true name, was it not apparent that the dark deeds of his career under a pseudonym were following him like a Nemesis?

These were some of the questions which gravely troubled the young tenderfoot as he sat there before that lone cabin on the Cheyenne with the silent night around him. Once, far off beyond the river, he heard a pack of coyotes yelping on the trail, and he wondered if they had driven the buzzards from their feast on the carcass of the dead horse, or if it was over the body of the horse's master that the prowling scavengers of the desert were quarreling.

Some one came out of the cabin and approached Lang, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Pard," said the friendly voice of Bud Blake, "you don't want to be going off by your lonesome to court the blues. I reckon I understand some how you feel, but Bab and I'll stand by you, and you don't want to let it cut you up so deep. We've still got a right smart of a jaunt ahead of us, and you should pick up all the sleep you can corral, so I think you'd better come inside and bunk up for the night."

"Thank you, Bud," said Lang, rising with a little shiver. "I think so, too."

CHAPTER XVI.

EXPLAINING HOW LANG CAME TO DISCOVER A HUT IN THE HILLS AND WITNESS A HORRIFYING TRAGEDY.

They did not leave the ranch on the Cheyenne until the afternoon of the following day, and another night had fallen when they arrived at the mouth of Red Cañon, the tragic gateway to the Hills. Old Jo had told them of the massacre of the Metz outfit in the cañon. Five men and two women, comprising the party, had stopped for supper at a spring, when the redskins fired upon them from ambush. Not one of the seven escaped. Their horribly mutilated bodies were discovered by the next party of adventurers to pass through the cañon.

The moon, big and round and blood-red, was coming up in the east as Injun Jo halted, and indicated that they should make temporary camp and take supper there at the mouth of the cañon.

"We'll give the critters a chance to rest," he said; "but we'll start ag'in soon enough to git through the cañon in plenty of time afore mornin'."

So they built their fire, cooked and ate supper, and rested a while in the moonshine before getting again on their way. And when everything was once more prepared for them to proceed they went forward with their rifles in their hands and their eyes and ears wide open.

Once fairly within the cañon they found the walls, like jaws of a mighty trap, rising several hundred feet on either side. These walls were of red sandstone and loose rocks, with many black shadows, where scores of Indians might lie to pick them off.

The moonlight fell on one wall, while the other lay in blackness. The horses' hoofs and the creaking of the wagon made echoes amid the rocks. A wind that had a chill like death came down the gorge and struck them in the face. Yet what they more than half expected

did not take place, and daybreak found them halted for breakfast with the deadly cañon behind.

After having coffee and eating cheerfully, they went forward rejoicing, with the exception of Lang. As for the young tenderfoot, his heart was not light, even though the end of the perilous journey seemed now not far off. In spite of his courage and unfaltering determination, he could not put away dread of that hour when he should again stand face to face with his treacherous uncle. Dread, however, did not cause him to falter in the least; when he thought of that coming meeting he set his teeth, and an expression of grim resolution settled on his face.

On starting out this morning, Bud insisted on taking Lang's place on the wagon, so the boy from the East was given an opportunity to ride astride. Bab kept near and talked to him vivaciously, seeming now as care-free as some wild thing of the woods and hills.

They had not proceeded far when a crashing at a distance on the slope of a wooded hill startled them, and they looked in time to see a great elk go bounding over a ridge and disappear.

All in a moment Lang was seized by a wonderfully great desire to get a shot at this lordly creature; so that, rifle in hand, he leaped from his saddle and ran into the timber on the side of the ridge, crying back to the others that he would return directly.

He heard Injun Jo call to him, but heeded not the words of the old scout as he went panting and rushing upward through the pines, failing to realize the folly of this effort. There was not one chance in a thousand that he would again put his eyes upon the antlered monarch; but knowing nothing of that, he kept on until he had reached the top of the ridge, where he could look over upon the other side.

All around him lay the darkly wooded hills. The scene was wild and rugged, but he spent no time in surveying the general aspect, looking close to where he fancied he might again see the game he sought. The instinct of the hunter was powerful upon him, but the art and knowledge of the hunter was possessed by him not at all.

Something seemed to move and slip away into the shadows of the pines below, and on he went, passing beyond the ridge in this fruitless chase. He kept to the cover of the trees, moving as silently and swiftly as possible. Behind were voices calling, but he did not answer them, for he feared to give the elk fresh alarm.

Reaching the spot where he fancied he had seen the moving object, he stood still and peered all about through the pines, his thumb on the hammer of his rifle, which he held ready to toss to his shoulder in a twinkling.

As he stood thus, the woods and hills were silent for a little, and then, from some point farther down, came a faint crackling that quickly died away.

"There's Mr. Elk!" whispered the boy, and directly he slipped forward again, his feet making little sound or none at all.

Lang knew it must be an elk he had spied, having seen many pictures of them and having read much of the grand sport of still hunting these lords of the wilderness. His appetite for shooting an elk had thus been whetted to a keen edge, and desire now led him on and on long after he was disappointed at not obtaining another view of the game.

At last he came to an opening that led downward through a pleasant little valley, and there at a far distance, amid some timber, he saw smoke rising.

"Can it be Indians?" he asked himself; and immediately decided that such was scarce likely to be the case, as the pouring of white men into the hills would cause the savages to be wary about building fires.

A great curiosity took hold of him. He hesitated about turning back, feeling that some secret magnet was drawing him toward that faint column of smoke. Confident that his friends would wait for him, he finally decided, hastening his footsteps toward the smoke.

Coming with a due amount of caution to the timber, he stole forward until he saw, beside a stream that ran through the valley, what appeared like a deserted hut that had been built by some venturesome prospector. The window was wide open, and likewise the door. From a stone chimney rose the smoke that had drawn him to the spot.

But more things than this he saw to interest and excite him, for standing before the cabin was a canvas-covered wagon, and a short distance away were several picketed horses.

At a glance Lang recognized the wagon and those horses, and knew he had stumbled upon the outfit of his uncle. This was a discovery to stir him, and, all in a moment, he fancied he knew the meaning of the powerful force he had felt drawing him to this spot.

The morning that had been sunny and smiling had now grown sombre, with gray clouds filling the sky and a wind that whispered in the pines like watchers beside the dead. The boy felt the change and shivered, drawing back as if to retreat at once. Then he saw a man step out swiftly from the trees beyond the opening in which stood the cabin and advance toward one of the horses.

Surprise struck hard at Lang, for that man was neither his uncle nor the buckskin giant, Rattlesnake Jack. Still the boy recognized him on the instant as one of the three men who had engaged with Norton and Harper in the card game at Rawhide Buttes, the very one whose wrist Lang had clutched barely in time to prevent him from driving his knife to the hilt in the back of the big man with the peak-crowned hat.

The man walked straight toward the horse with the strip-face and white stockings, the one Rattlesnake Jack had secured when he turned back on that eventful night after being compelled, in company with Mr. Norton, to leave the wagon train.

The horse lifted its head, pricked forward its ears, and neighed as plainly as words its welcome to its master, making no move to get away.

Lang noted that the man had a pistol in his hand and was watching sharply the open door of the cabin. Stooping, he deftly pulled the picket pin, and it was while he was thus employed that he was startled by a sound that caused him to leap erect and turn with his pistol ready.

The watching lad had gasped as he saw Rattlesnake Jack come from amid the trees with his arms well filled with wood he had gathered for the fire in the hut. It is likely that at first Jack took the stranger for David Norton; and, on discovering his error, the shock of surprise caused him to drop the wood. His hand was on his revolver when the stranger spoke, having thrown up his own pistol in readiness for shooting.

"Steady, you!" called the man by the horse. "If you try to draw I'll certainly let you have it smoking hot!"

Now this man had "the drop," and to Jack Harper life was far too precious for him to throw it away in the forlorn hope of a miss, especially as a man who could rise, wheel, and cover with such deftness was almost certain to shoot straight. This being the case, the giant made no further effort to get his own weapon from his hip. Instead, he coolly said:

"Why, hello, pard! Howdy! Is it you? I'm sartin surprised up a whole lot at seein' ye."

"I reckon you are," was the sarcastic retort. "But you might have known that Bill Hendricks was not the man to let any galoot rustle his horse and not follow clean to Kingdom Come to get the critter back."

Jack lifted his eyebrows in pretended surprise. He was not an unhandsome man of the type he represented, and at this moment he looked most attractive and interesting.

"I 'low you sure must be laborin' under some mistake, my friend," he said easily. "I wins that hoss from you all fair an' proper, which gives me the right to take him, and I does so. I don't judge there is anything nohow in that to which you can object extensively."

"I know as well as you do the manner in which you won this horse. You and your partner are a clever pair of sharps,

but your crooked game was dropped to, and you were mighty lucky to get off with your skins all whole. When one of you came back and stole my horse he certainly was inviting the careful attention of a lynching committee."

At this Jack threw back his head and burst forth laughing loudly, after the manner that Lang Strong so well remembered as proving most irritating on the event of his first meeting with the big man in buckskin at Fort Laramie.

"Them there remarks o' yourn air a plenty amusin'," the blond giant declared. "Howsomever, I don't propose to hold no discussion whatever with ye, which ain't any necessary. The hoss is mine, an' I keeps him, you bet!"

At this the man who claimed the horse, and who called himself Bill Hendricks, seemed to decide on immediate action.

"Put up your hands!" he commanded. "Up with them instanter—empty!"

There was deadliness in his voice, and Harper did not hesitate about obeying.

"That's right," said Hendricks.

Still keeping Jack covered, he backed round to the opposite side of the horse, so that he could mount while holding the giant under his weapon. This brought him on the side toward the hut.

Lang's heart was pounding violently as he watched every movement and listened to every word. Knowing the man had been defrauded, his sympathy was entirely with Hendricks, and he wished him all success in his effort to take his property away.

But now as the man seemed about to make his next move, he suddenly dropped his pistol, pitched forward against the horse, and then fell soddenly to the ground.

At the same instant the report of a pistol sounded within the cabin.

Staring, cold as ice, turned to stone for the moment, Lang saw David Norton step out through the open door and advance toward the fallen man. In his hand was a revolver, from the muzzle of which a bit of smoke still curled upward.

Horrified beyond measure by what his eyes had beheld, the boy turned and fled silently and swiftly from the spot of this frightful tragedy.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH AN UNSTABLE FOOTING PRECIPITATES LANG INTO A FRESH PREDICAMENT.

More than half expecting to receive a bullet in the back, the panting lad ran on and on, until at last, quite out of breath and exhausted from his great exertions, he came to a full stop in the midst of a thicket. There he stood and listened for sounds of pursuit, clutching the rifle to which he had clung, and thinking that he would never fall without extreme resistance into the hands of those murderers.

Although the woods and hills were very still, the silence did not reassure him, for in it there was the hush of death.

Now he knew to the full the sort of man he had eagerly traveled two thousand miles to meet, and his heart was sick within him. Not only was David Norton a cheating gambler, but he was likewise a murderer.

As Lang stood listening in the thicket, in fancy he again saw the horses amid the dark pines, the buckskin giant, the falling man as he pitched against the horse he had come to claim, and the dark-faced assassin walking coolly from the lonely hut, with his smoking pistol in his hand. In the boy's ears seemed to echo the muffled sound of the death shot.

For a long time he stood there, gradually recovering his composure, although somewhere within him he felt that his very soul continued to shudder.

Since being abandoned on the border of the Band Lands, he had, until this hour, looked forward bravely to the time when he should stand again face to face with his uncle and demand from him an explanation of his reprehensible action; but now he was certain that he wished never again to set eyes on his dastardly relative.

How could he write the truth to his mother! It would break her heart and carry her in grief to the grave to know the full depravity of the brother she had loved and trusted. Lang resolved at once that much of the black truth she should never learn through him.

Now he began to think of the friends he had left in his foolish pursuit of the elk, and he determined to make all haste to rejoin them. Having peered from the thicket, to make sure no one was watching for him to come out, he stole silently forth and hurried away as fast as his legs could carry him, casting occasional apprehensive glances over his shoulder.

He felt that he would have very little trouble in retracing his steps to the trail at the point where he had abandoned it, and it was not for a considerable time that he began to wonder at the distance, fancying he had proceeded much farther than he thought before coming to the hut in the pines.

Finally he noted that the country seemed to be growing even wilder and more wooded, and when he looked around he was suddenly struck by the conviction that in his agitation he had chosen the wrong course. It seemed singular that he could have made such a mistake, but he divined immediately that it had come about in the excitement of his flight after witnessing the tragedy in the pines.

In great haste and without sufficient consideration, he turned about and sought to follow his footsteps backward, although he knew success in this would lead him near by that dread cluster of pines where the ground was fresh stained with the blood of a man who had in the most cowardly manner been shot down from the rear.

What he had passed through while lost upon the plains made him sincerely dread another and similar experience in the Hills, and he hurried forward with almost frantic haste, fearing greatly that his friends would become impatient and press on before he could again reach the trail.

Not until another full hour had passed did he admit to himself that he was completely lost and quite bewildered, utterly lacking all sagacity in the choice of the course he ought to pursue. He was seized by a desire to run hither and thither aimlessly, although his reason plainly told him the folly of wasting his energies in such a manner.

The overcast sky prevented him from seeking aid by the sun in determining his course; but not even the sun could have rendered him much assistance in those rugged hills, with their winding valleys, deep ravines, and rocky gulches.

He was certain that midday had passed when he came upon one of those narrow ravines where the sides were steep and difficult sheer to the bottom. As he paused, considering the best way to descend, or whether to descend at all, there came to his ears the sound of horses' hoofs and wagon wheels, causing his heart to give a mighty leap.

Thrilled with pleasurable anticipation, he waited the appearance of the travelers, who were moving along the course of the dry ravine, more than half believing that good fortune had brought him again upon the friends from whom he had been so disagreeably separated.

Directly a man came riding into view, followed by two led horses, and they by two more that were attached to a canvas-topped wagon, on the seat of which was the driver.

At first glance Lang had recognized the big man in the saddle, who bestrode a fine horse with a strip-face and white forward stockings. This man's peaked hat, with the bullet-pierced crown, was canted a bit rakishly, being wound about with the skin of a rattlesnake as a band. From the hole in his hat to his silvery spurs he was every inch of him the fine adventurer of the border.

However, it was not this man on whom the boy gazed spellbound for the moment; it was at the dark man with the black mustache and small imperial, graceful, yet gloomy of face, who sat on the wagon.

But Lang quickly shook off the spell that had fallen on him and made a hasty move to get out of sight. At that moment the ground seemed to crumble be-

neath his feet. With a gasp of dismay, he sought to leap back, but the slipping stones and earth carried him in a miniature landslide and a cloud of dust to the bottom of the ravine, where he landed battered, bruised, and dazed.

When he looked up, rubbing the dirt from his eyes and spitting fine particles from his mouth, he saw the wagon had stopped, and the driver was already striding toward him, pistol in hand.

Fully expecting quickly to meet the fate of the man in the pines, the boy felt about wildly for his rifle, which had fallen clatteringly with him into the ravine. His one thought was to defend himself as best he could.

His hand, however, failed to find the weapon, and he sat up helplessly as David Norton halted a few feet away and stared at him, undisguised astonishment betrayed in his manner.

Rattlesnake Jack had pulled up and quieted the horses, for the animals were alarmed by the rattle and rush of the landslide and the appearance of a downward tumbling figure. The big man in buckskin was first to speak.

"Whatever is this I sees?" he cried. "Is it sure enough our young pard what got lost on the trail, and what we has worried over a heap for fear he might meet up with redskins? It sartin looks like him a whole lot."

But Norton still stood silent, frowning and threatening, the pistol in his hand. He made no hypocritical pretense of pleasure over the surprising and unexpected appearance of this boy whom he had abandoned in the Bad Lands, and whom, beyond doubt, he had hoped never again to behold.

Lang found no words then; but, in spite of the peril he believed himself in, he returned with something like defiance the steady gaze of those black eyes.

It was Jack who again broke the silence with words.

"Pard Norton," he said, "it sure is the younker, an' now you won't have to worry yourself no more about him. It powerful near upsets you when we couldn't find him no more arter the wolves pitches on our hosses an' we has to hurry a lot to keep the critters from eatin' up our whole outfit; but yere he is all perk an' lively, an' I 'lows you'll be mighty glad for the sake o' his poor old mother."

Something like the ghost of a sardonic smile curled the corners of the dark man's mustache.

"It is very remarkable," he said, in his quiet way, cold as ice. "You have my congratulations, my dear nephew; and I must say you have played your end of the game surprisingly well. How does it happen that you turn up here like this?"

Lang choked over his first words. He felt like denouncing his villainous uncle without further ado, but discretion and the fear of consequences under the circumstances prevented him from doing so, which was most fortunate, for Norton was in such a mood that a little additional irritation would have made him deadly.

The boy told the truth briefly, which was the best course he could have followed.

"Well," said David Norton shortly, "you're in luck. You can take your old place on the wagon, and we'll go ahead."

So presently Lang found himself once more on the seat of the wagon, driving the horses, with his uncle and Rattlesnake Jack riding in advance. He had not been hurt by his fall into the ravine, but it took him some time to compose himself to the change which this misadventure had brought about.

He was aware that the men exchanged low words not intended for his ears as they rode on, and he was far from being at his ease. He doubted not that David Norton would be anything but satisfied on again finding himself encumbered by the boy whom he had once abandoned, and Lang could only judge what might happen by the revelation of the man's character which he had that day witnessed.

His rifle had been picked up and thrust into the wagon, and it lay where he could reach it without trouble. He was attacked by a desperate desire to seize the weapon and bid defiance to these ruffians. It must even be confessed that for one fleeting instant he thought he would be justified in shooting them down; but immediately he was filled with horror because such a thing had flashed unbidden through his brain.

It made no difference to the men that the boy might be hungry; he was given no invitation to eat. And so, following no beaten trail, they moved onward through the dull afternoon.

Lang had been wise in telling his story, for though he had spoken of his pursuit of the elk as the reason whereby he became lost in the Hills, he had studiously avoided saying anything that might lead his uncle or Rattlesnake Jack to suspect he had witnessed the tragedy in the pines.

Mid-afternoon had passed when they came upon still another abandoned hut, and there the men decided to stop for the night. This hut, like the other, was built in a somewhat hidden spot, yet was located near a stream. By the stream were some rude sluice boxes, which appeared to indicate that the man who erected the hut had found "pay dirt" there.

Glad enough was Lang to partake of the food given him when supper had been prepared, for he found himself nearly famished. In spite of everything that had happened or anything he feared might occur, he ate heartily.

The interior of the little hut was gloomy enough, but a wood fire in the open stone fireplace made it somewhat more cheerful. Lang had hoped that he would be sent to gather wood for the fire, and he had been fully resolved to bolt the moment he was out of sight, regardless of his hunger and the possibility of perishing in the Hills; but enough wood had been found piled against the outer wall of the hut, and the desperate lad was not given the opportunity he courted.

He was aware that David Norton was watching him closely, and it began to seem that the man who had once sought to get rid of him was now quite as fully determined to hold fast to him. This, however, was in no degree reassuring.

After eating, both Norton and Harper smoked, the former rolling a cigarette with the skill of a Spaniard, while the latter contented himself with a pipe. The aroma of tobacco filled the hut. Outside, seen through the open door, the horses stamped, whisked away the flies with their tails, and fed contentedly. At a little distance the brook murmured over its sandy bed, where a fortune in yellow grains and dust might be hidden.

The men exchanged few words, and the boy could find none at all worth speaking.

At sunset the clouds broke in the west, and a golden bar of light shot in at the window of the hut and fell on the opposite wall. Looking forth longingly, Lang saw the clouds close in again and the golden light smother in their folds.

Then darkness crept up from the gulches and hollows of the sombre hills. Night advanced silent and awesome, and it brought increasing apprehension to the heart of the boy, who knew not what it might have in store for him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEREUPON HE TAKES A PIECE OF ADVICE AND A HORSE AND GOES MADLY GALLOPING INTO THE DARKNESS.

With uneasiness that he could not fully hide, Lang noted that, as he smoked, David Norton was regarding him steadily in a manner that seemed altogether sinister and alarming. The boy wondered if his uncle was not conjecturing by what method he could most easily and effectually carry out the dark scheme at which he had once made such an utter failure.

The fire began to throw dancing shadows on the wall. Harper replenished it with a fresh supply of fuel, refilled his pipe, and continued to smoke, his silence seeming quite unusual and ominous. He appeared studiously to keep his eyes from resting on the boy, who was practically a captive.

The silence of the men and their behavior, which seemed pregnant with dark meaning, filled Lang with a desire to spring suddenly out through the door and flee for his very life; but he had seen with what deadly aim his dreaded uncle could use a pistol, and he was convinced that there was not one chance in a hundred for him safely to reach cover without being tumbled to the dust with a bullet through his body.

So he waited; and finally, still without speaking, David Norton flung down his finished cigarette, rose quietly, and walked out of the hut among the horses.

Watching the man who had stepped outside, Lang was startled to hear near at hand a soft movement, and then he noted that Harper had slightly shifted his position, so that he could likewise keep his eyes on Norton. After a little the big man glanced toward Lang, seeming to hesitate over something that was in his mind.

Norton was shifting the horses about so they could obtain better feed.

"Looker here, younker," suddenly said Rattlesnake Jack, in an unusually soft and repressed tone of voice, "don't you opine it would be a right good play for you to hike out quiet-like an' see if you can't pick up with them friends what you has been lucky enough to make? It ain't nohow healthy for a boy o' your years hereabouts."

Lang started up immediately.

"I'll go—I'll go at once!"

"Stiddy, you!" the giant gently growled. "Don't be so previous. I has some advice to deal out to ye." And, as Lang sat down again, he went on: "Your uncle, what has become some attached to ye, might raise objections if you was to hurry off right under his nose. It shore might irk him up a whole lot to think you could be so ongrateful as to want to run away from him that-a-way, so, if you takes my advice, which don't cost you nothing whatever, you'll do it on the quiet when he ain't none aware o' what's transpirin'."

"All right," said Lang. "But when—and how?"

"To-night arter we turns in. I 'low that'll be the best plan to pursue. It's sartin goin' to be a heap dark, but if you follers this crick down you shore strikes the main stream an' the reg'lér trail, which takes ye straight inter Custer City. It can't be no great sight more'n ten mile or so. Savvy?"

"Yes, yes!" eagerly breathed the excited boy, who feared the other man might return at any moment. "Go on!"

Right here Jack seemed to hesitate, appearing undecided over something. After a little time he continued his instructions.

"You don't want to let your uncle suspicion none whatever that you're goin' to be ongrateful enough to run away from him, an' so to-night when we turns in you turns in, too. In the night I gives you the sign, an' you gits up plenty quiet and ambles. Outside, near the crick and fur from the cabin, you finds a hoss all saddled an' ready, an' this yere animal you takes. I opine you——"

He stopped speaking suddenly, for David Norton was returning to the cabin. The big man smoked on without another word, while Lang turned his back on the fire that the light might not betray the excitement he felt certain his face expressed.

It was not long after reëntering the cabin before Norton spread his blankets on the floor and prepared to make himself comfortable for the night. Lang had been given a blanket, and at a slight nod from Harper he imitated his uncle's example; but he did not remove his boots or any portion of his clothing, save his hat. He chose a spot on the floor as far away from the man he dreaded as possible, wrapped the blanket about him, and made a pretense of soon falling fast asleep.

Harper was more deliberate about turning in. First he heaped more fuel on the fire, and then, after a time, he stretched himself between the boy and David Norton.

The boy lay with every sense keenly awake. Outside he heard the occasional stamping of the horses. The wind came in little puffs, sometimes blowing the ascending smoke back from the blackened hole in the roof. The fire crackled pleasantly, and on the boy's feet there was an agreeable warmth. The smell of burning wood mingled with the odor of tobacco, which had not entirely escaped from the cabin.

Lang wondered and was annoyed because Harper had replenished the fire, for he was eager to lose no time about getting away, and he felt that it would be unsafe to move until the light had died out. He had taken note that David Norton was careful to place close beside him his rifle, where his hand could find it quickly in case he wished to use it.

Rattlesnake Jack seemed to fall asleep directly, and his hearty snoring was most irritating to the anxious, nervous boy. It seemed that the big man had quite forgotten the scheme he had unfolded for Lang. David Norton slept as quietly and peacefully as an infant, his breathing being regular and soft; and he gave no starts, turns, or groanings, as might have been expected from one with a guilty conscience and a troubled mind.

Was he asleep? The boy asked himself that question as through his slightly opened eyelids he peered past the blond head of Harper at the muffled and motionless figure beyond. And now he felt creeping over him a vague suspicion that he was being deceived. This grew upon him steadily and strongly when he thought of the unexpected conduct of Harper, who was now snoring serenely away after planning the escape and promising to give the signal.

On meditation this suspicion grew to something like conviction. He began to believe that he comprehended the depths of the plot, and the horror of it made him shiver. It seemed that Harper had craftily awakened in him a determination to escape that night; had promised him aid, and then had gone to sleep for a sinister purpose, believing the boy would be consumed with such impatience as would lead him finally to make the effort of his own accord. Then David Norton, pretending to mistake the lad for a prowling intruder, would seize his rifle and shoot.

"If they mean to kill me," thought Lang, "they will do it somehow if I remain with them." And this belief led him to resolve upon making an effort to get away when the fire should die down and darkness reign within the hut.

The fire sank lower, and the wind shuddered at intervals outside the hut.

At last, after what seemed hours of waiting, the embers were turning to ashes on the stone hearth. The light had died out, save when the fitful wind came down through the smoke hole to blow aside the ashes and fan the coals into expiring life.

Trembling in spite of himself, but battling with his nerves to steady them, the desperate lad was preparing to move when, all at once, Harper gave a loud snore that seemed to awaken him. He grunted, turned over, and, with wildly hammering heart, Lang saw the huge black bulk of the man slowly and rustlingly rise to a sitting posture in the darkness.

For a few seconds Harper sat quite still; then, making very little noise, he dropped off his blankets, rose to his feet, and went quietly out of the hut, whispering no word or giving no sign to the breathless boy.

Filled with indecision and doubt of the most painful character, Lang lay still and speculated on the meaning of this move. Had Rattlesnake Jack withdrawn in order that David Norton might be left entirely alone with the lad to accomplish his black purpose with no human eye to witness the deed?

The terrors of that night were long remembered by Langley Strong.

Norton seemed to continue sleeping as peacefully as ever, and now Lang could distinctly hear his soft, deep, long breathing, which was somewhat reassuring.

In a few moments, however, the boy began to wonder if Jack Harper had not stolen forth as a signal for him to follow, a thing which seemed quite possible. His listening ears seemed to de-

tect movements of some sort amid the horses.

Had Lang been provided with a loaded weapon he would have risked everything by seeking to follow the big man in buckskin; but his rifle was beyond his reach, and some time during the day lately passed he had lost his nickel-plated revolver. The only thing left to him was his cheap "hunting knife."

For all of his utter lack of means to repulse an attack upon his life, the boy was on the point of moving when he heard soft footsteps, and Harper came back into the hut with the same silence he had maintained on slipping out. Still, as the big man was getting into his blankets, Norton seemed suddenly to awaken, whereupon he sharply demanded:

"Who's that?"

Lang gave a convulsive jerk of his body, but the drawling voice of the big man answered with a sleepy intonation that was capitally well assumed:

"It are me, partner; that's all."

Norton said no more, but seemed again to drop off asleep with the perfect peacefulness that so surprised Lang.

Harper rolled over nearer the boy, who did not stir. A period of silence followed that seemed interminable to the lad, whose nerves were wrought to the highest tension. He was finally startled by the touch of a hand that was stretched out from beneath the blankets in which the man near him lay wrapped.

"Are ye awake, younker?" came the softly whispered question.

Thrilled from head to foot, Lang chokingly whispered back:

"Yes."

"Then ye'd better git up an' git immejit, an' be plenty still about it," whispered Harper. "You'll find the hoss saddled an' waitin' fer ye."

Lang's hesitation lasted only a moment longer, but doubt and dread continued to bear heavily upon him as he got up as quietly as he could. To his quivering senses the slightest rustling seemed fearfully loud, and he felt certain that Norton must be aroused by his movements. It was only with the strongest effort to control himself that he kept from making a mad bolt for the open air and freedom.

David Norton continued motionless, and the boy crept forth from the hut into the open night, the cool breath of which seemed to restore his sorely taxed courage. The thing he had dreaded had not happened, and his heart now swelled with a sensation of gratitude and thankfulness toward Rattlesnake Jack, who had thus befriended him a second time.

He was not yet safe, however, and therefore he lost little time lingering in the vicinity of the hut. Harper had told him where to find the saddled horse, and he proceeded straight to the waiting animal. The picket pin was jerked up in a twinkling, and Lang led the shying animal away down the stream.

The horse snorted, shaking its head disapprovingly, as if not at all satisfied that what was taking place was right and proper. Its hoofs clicked on the rocks, and its breath, blown loudly through its palpitating nostrils, struck upon the boy's hand.

Among the animals left behind one whinnied softly after their departing companion, and the horse Lang was leading answered with a louder neigh.

Immediately, with one great electrified bound, Lang reached the saddle. His open hand fell on the rump of the horse with a crack like a pistol shot, and away leaped the creature with reckless speed, bearing the young tenderfoot clatteringly into the safety of the enfolding darkness.

CHAPTER XIX.

OF THE ARRIVAL AT CUSTER CITY AND THE CALAMITOUS APPEARANCE OF THREE MEN IN SEARCH OF A HORSE.

That no serious accident happened to either boy or horse in that mad gallop through the night is wholly remarkable; that on striking the well-defined regular trail, leading up French Creek to Custer City, the boy turned in the wrong direction and rode many miles before discovering his mistake is not at all surprising.

The threatening night had passed with a gusty rainfall near morning; but, before the rising sun, the ragged gray clouds dispersed and fled, leaving a blue sky smiling over the sombrous hills. The world seemed washed clean and fresh with the rain, and the morning air was fragrant with odors of wet moss and pine. In open spots along the trail wild flowers gladdened the eye and bestowed their sweetness on the passing breeze. A few birds chittered flitteringly through the thickets.

When the morning was somewhat advanced a bedraggled boy, mounted on a horse with a white strip on its face and white forward stockings, rode into Custer, a town of a thousand houses and less than two hundred inhabitants. The place was regularly laid out, and the buildings were constructed of logs and rough-hewn timbers and planks. Not then knowing the cause of the strangely deserted appearance of the town, Lang looked around in wonderment and surprise. Later he learned of the great rush of men from Custer early that spring, whence came stories of marvelously rich discoveries at Deadwood. In the fall and through the winter Custer had been packed to overflowing; now it was like a dying boom town of the changeable West.

Looking for evidences of gold mining, Lang discovered a very few bronzed and mud-stained men working with pan and rocker on what had proved to be the richer claims of French Creek. Uncoated, their sleeves rolled back and exposing their brown arms, they stood in their wet, long-legged boots and delved for the dull yellow grains.

In the "business section" of the town squat shanties and buildings with straight, square board fronts, which rose deceptively to the height of two stories, bore such signs as "Groceries & Liquors," "Provisions & Hardware," "Commission House," "Hale Brothers, Wholesale, Retail, Feed, Flour, Groceries," "Eating House & Saloon," and here it was that there were more signs of life, although most of the men gathered about seemed to be travelers who were making preparations to go onward.

There were on the street a jerky wagon, drawn by a pair of mules, and a genuine prairie schooner, canvas-topped, to which were attached four oxen. There were men on horses and men afoot. The doors of the business houses stood invitingly open, but most of the crowd passed in and out of the places where liquors were to be found. No one gave great attention to the boy on the strip-faced horse as he rode up and stopped in front of the building which bore a sign that denoted it was a restaurant as well as a saloon.

Lang looked around hopefully, thinking that somewhere there his eyes might chance upon those friends whom he now eagerly sought, Bud Blake, his sister, and old Injun Jo; but in that gathering of rough men he saw not one familiar face, and all were intent on their own business.

Dismounting, he hitched his horse to a post that upheld one end of a sign before one of the buildings, and then passed among the men, making inquiries if any one had seen anything of the outfit from which he had unfortunately become separated. Some were gruff and curt in their replies, some were kindly, and some smiled in amusement or derision at the anxious young tenderfoot; but none appeared to have seen his friends.

"Perhaps they have not yet passed through this place," thought Lang. "Perhaps they stopped to search for me after I ran away from them in such a fool manner."

Now that he had learned the forbidding truth concerning his uncle, the boy tenderfoot felt the absolute necessity of again finding in that wild region the only beings on whose friendship he could depend, for he sorely needed companionship and advice to drive from his

soul that overwhelming sensation of homesickness which again threatened to crush his determined spirit. He well knew the danger and folly of permitting his thoughts to dwell longingly on the poor, though comfortable, home he had left far away and the affectionate mother from whom he had parted with such high hopes of fortune and so many promises of a happy reunion in the bright future. The bridges were all burned behind him, and there could be no weakening thoughts of turning back; he had come to that new country of gold to seek his fortune, and there in spite of all he would remain and manfully strive to accomplish the object which had possessed him when he set out.

If his friends had not yet passed through Custer, the best thing he could do would be to remain there until he could rejoin them when they came along; and this was the course he determined upon when he was satisfied that those friends were behind instead of ahead of him.

He had yet a little money in his pocket, and hunger led him into the eating house before which he had hitched his horse. At one side were some bare wooden tables, at the other a bar; the tables were deserted, the bar was lined with men in heavy boots and ragged beards. The talk of the men was rough and boisterous, and they besprinkled their conversation freely with profanity. For the most part they were bound for Deadwood, and they were talking of the fabulous tales of wealth which had poured out from the New Eldorado upon the rest of the country; but some were foiled fortune seekers, who had been to the fountain head of these wondrous tales and had turned back in disappointment and disgust. One of the latter, a slender man with blue eyes, leaned against the end of the bar and listened with a cynical smile to the talk of three others who were telling of the rich strikes made around Deadwood. When they had finished, he spoke:

"Gentlemen," he said, putting down his empty glass, "there is not enough gold in Deadwood Gulch to put a heavy plating on the case of an open-faced watch."

Immediately he became the butt of their scorn and derision, for they turned on him the vials of their ridicule and contempt, advising him to go back straightway to his job of measuring calico. He took it all good-naturedly, even seeming to regard them with something like pity, calmly assuring them that they would sing another tune after they had reached Deadwood and investigated.

"What'll ye have, young feller?"

Lang started at the demand, put to him by a bearded man who had approached him where he sat by the table near one of the two front windows.

"I—I'd like some breakfast," said Lang.

"Nominate your grub," said the man.

"I—I beg your pardon?" faltered the boy.

"Here's the *meenyou*," said the man, pushing a greasy sheet of paper, on which there was some scrawling writing, before the youthful customer.

Lang looked it over, and the prices made him gasp. He quickly realized that unless he could soon find something to do to earn money what little he had in his pocket could not long ward off starvation. Nevertheless, having examined the bill of fare, he ordered ham, eggs, and coffee, his hunger making him reckless of consequences. The waiter retired, and the boy was left to himself in the corner by a window that opened on the street.

He looked out and saw the strip-faced horse impatiently pawing the ground where it was tied to the signpost. Without doubt the horse was hungry also, but, thank goodness, there were grassy valleys in the hills where the animal could be fed without expense.

Already Lang had noted with some regret that the animal given him for his escape by Rattlesnake Jack was the one that had been obtained in such a questionable manner at Rawhide Buttes, the one Harper had been accused of stealing, the one whose rightful owner had fallen before David Norton's pistol amid a certain dark cluster of pines in the Hills.

After the necessary delay, the boy's breakfast was brought, and, having paid for it, he fell to eating, his thoughts now so busy that he gave little heed to the talk of the men who came and went and thronged before the bar.

He had nearly finished when, happening to glance from the window, he discovered some commotion on the street, along which came three horses bearing as many riders. Two of these men sat firmly upright in their saddles, riding on either side of the third, whom they supported as he lurched forward limply, clinging weakly to the high saddle horn. Without the support of his companions he would have fallen at once to the ground.

"Them pilgrims has sure been up against redskins!" exclaimed a man in the open doorway, and he hastened forth to join the crowd that flocked at once about the trio.

As for Lang, he had given a little start and a gasp, and thereafter for some moments he sat staring white-faced at the three men. To him the wounded one seemed like a person risen from the dead, for he instantly recognized him as the owner of the horse, who had fallen in the pines, while his comrades were the other two who had been engaged in the game of cards with Norton and Harper on that memorable night at Rawhide Buttes.

That the wounded man had not been shot to death in the pines had come, Lang knew, from no merciful intention on the part of David Norton. Beyond a doubt Norton and Harper had left him where he fell, fully believing him finished. In time the man's comrades had found him, or he had managed to crawl back to them, and here were all three in Custer City.

While the boy sat there wondering over this, he observed still further commotion on the street, and saw one of the three men pointing excitedly at the strip-faced horse that was tied to the signpost. The heart of the lad fluttered wildly, and a cold chill ran over his body. Next he saw the crowd surround the horse, heard loud and excited words and savage oaths, and, as he started to his feet, the foremost of the mob crowded fiercely through the doorway, headed by one of the three men who had just arrived in town.

They saw the startled, white-faced young tenderfoot. The leader drew a pistol and cried:

"There he is!"

Then they fell upon him and dragged him forth to the open air, for what purpose he fancied he knew all too well.

Knowing the folly and uselessness of attempting resistance, Lang surrendered himself to the rude hands of those savage men, who most unceremoniously hurried him out into the street, where he was surrounded immediately and saw on every side scowling faces and accusing eyes.

"Right up the street, gents," called a hoarse voice. "Ye'll find a tree with a right stout limb what has come handy before this."

"That's the ticket!" shouted another man, who had a brutal face. "We makes short work of hoss thieves around these diggin's."

As the helpless lad was hustled along he became conscious that a noose had been flung about his neck. It contained a slipknot, and several of the men had clutched the rope and were running forward with it so fast that the noose closed about the boy's throat chokingly. When it had been brought forth and cast upon him he had not noted it in all that trepidation and excitement, but on discovering it, the thing filled him with a sense of unspeakable desperation and horror, for it seemed that those brutal men meant to swing him from a limb without giving him so much as an opportunity to say one word in his own defense.

To be continued in July TOP-NOTCH. Don't fail to get it!

TALKS WITH TOP-NOTCH FELLOWS

BY BURT L. STANDISH

These Hustling Times.

When you hear any one invidiously comparing present times with the past you may make up your mind that he has ceased to progress and is rapidly deteriorating into a "has been." The world moves swiftly in these days, and it takes a hustler to keep up with the procession. The times are just as good as they ever were, and, in many respects, a little better; for progress, advancement, and growth is a law of nature, and history proves that decay almost invariably begins with the cessation of progress and growth. Nine times out of ten—perhaps ninety-nine times out of a hundred—it is a fossil who complains that the boys or young people of to-day "are not what they used to be." Doubtless this assertion regarding the youth of our land is true, but it is *not* true in the sense intended by the whining critic. The up-to-date youngster is a hustler, and he is just as far in advance of the smart young fellow of the past as the up-to-date man is ahead of his great-grandfather who was considered a remarkably progressive citizen. There are drones and leeches and no-goods born to-day, but, comparatively, there were just as many of these in past times; only the modern test more quickly demonstrates and advertises the worth or worthlessness of every one. And it is only the mossback who ventures the assertion that the young man of the past had more and better opportunities to rise and make his way in the world; there were never such splendid opportunities—nor so many of them—as may be found to-day by the fellow who is determined to get on in life, and has it in him to do so.

Look, Listen and Keep Mum.

The successful business boy of to-day is a git-up-and-git fellow, who knows how to keep his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut—until the time comes to speak up. It is well enough to see a great deal and hear a great deal, but in most cases it is best to appear to see and hear far less than you really do. Take care not to get yourself classed as a "rubberer," for such prying, inquisitive persons are regarded with distrust and disdain; and you can legitimately and honorably see and hear enough to get wise to the things you should know without turning yourself into a peeper or eavesdropper. And beware of talking too much. You may think you know a great deal, and you may really be somewhat erudite and proficient, but your youth will count against you if you attempt to demonstrate the fact by mere words. You will often find it wise to remain silent when you chance to hear an older person falling into error of opinions or making assertions which you know are incorrect. Nevertheless, there are times when you should speak up, and when such occasions arise it will be best to speak without hesitation or faltering, yet with a certain amount of modesty and deference.

Boys Who Are Flying.

That the boys of the present time are hustlers they are proving in various ways. Witness their accomplishments in the science of wireless telegraphy. Some lads still in their knickerbockers have recently made successful models of air ships and are now engaged in drawing plans for fliers that will fly—doubtless. The youngest of these is Charles B. Whittlesey, Jr., of Hartford, Conn., who is only eleven years of age, but who has already constructed two miniature dirigible balloons. His first attempt resulted in a balloon eight and one-half feet in length and two feet in diameter, fitted with a wooden car and a motor driven by a special battery. He has since built one twenty-four feet in length and six feet in diameter, to which is attached a car twelve feet long. A two-bladed propeller is to be used on this car, and it is to be run by powerful batteries. Cromwell Dixon, Jr., of Columbus, Ohio, has not only constructed a dirigible, but he has gone aloft in it, carrying the American flag to a height of 2,000 feet, it is reported. Percy W. Perce, a New York boy, has in the past year built more than fifty midget flyers and several gliders. Ralph Barnaby, aged fourteen, is a successful builder of gliders, having received his inspiration from the Wright brothers. But Lawrence Lesh, sixteen years old, a New Yorker, actually holds the world's record for gliding, being credited with a flight of six miles over the St. Lawrence River. Some two years ago, while making a glide, he fell from his machine and broke one of his legs, which has made him a permanent cripple, yet he has persisted in the work, and is now constructing a genuine heavier-than-air flying machine, which is to be propelled by a motor. These boys are fair examples of the genuine hustling, up-to-date youngsters of the present day.

Some Opinions of Top-Notch.

Live boys everywhere are readers of the TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE, and they are universally enthusiastic over it. We have received many letters from these delighted readers, but lack of space prevents us from quoting from more than two of them. Ray A. Bederman, of Canton, Ohio, writes: "I have read the two first numbers, and I think they are the best ever. I have got two other fellows to read it already, and I expect to get more. The only thing wrong with TOP-NOTCH is that it is not published often enough. All my friends think the same, and say it ought to be published every two weeks, or, better still, every week." And this comes from Raymond A. Stevens, of Amsterdam, N. Y.: "Is TOP-NOTCH a winner? Well, I guess! During the last two or three weeks I bought five extra copies of the world's best boys' magazine, and, up to date, have secured four new readers. But I don't intend to stop there, for it is easy to get readers for TOP-NOTCH. The head clerk in the store where I work buys TOP-NOTCH for his boy, and you can bet he reads them himself, for the other day he said to me: 'I don't see why they don't publish that book every week.' Another of the readers I secured said: 'I can hardly wait for it to come out; wish they would publish it every week.'" These are interesting letters—to us, at least. They lead us to believe we have struck the proper vein in our attempt to give the boys and young men of the country a real live, clean, snappy publication that will be appreciated and bought. Tell us in your letters which stories you like best, in order that we may give you more of the same kind. As I have said, want of room may prevent us from publishing all of your letters, but you may be sure that they will be read.

Great Strides Ahead.

And now let me say it is not at all unlikely that Ray Bederman and Raymond Stevens may at some not-far-distant day have the pleasure of seeing "the world's best boys' magazine" appear oftener than it does at present; for if there are enough readers in the country who really wish the TOP-NOTCH to be published oftener their wish shall be gratified. Not only that, but we are prepared to give them a bigger and handsomer magazine. You can see that we have made some decided steps of progress since the appearance of the first issue, but we have not yet begun to show our hand. For one thing, take note of the advance we have made in the way of covers. Don't you think the one on the present number a peach? It is the work of an artist of note, Rob't A. Graef, who will also furnish the July cover. And look on the last cover page for the announcement of the contents of the July issue—five complete stories and a big installment of "The Deadwood Trail." That's going some! And these stories are dandies, the king pin of them all being Ernest A. Young's great college yarn of the cinder path, entitled "Max Truman, Miler." This is a long complete story, of which the TOP-NOTCH makes a feature in every issue. "When Hall Rowed Stroke," by John D. Emerson, is another of Mr. Emerson's school stories, even a little better than "The Climbers," printed in this issue. Jack Gordan gives us "Billy White, Reformer," a sea tale that is a rattler; while Albert W. Tolman contributes one of his short thrillers, "When the Big Snake Celebrated." "How Dugan Regained His Nerve," by Robert A. Lane, is an interesting episode of the professional diamond.

An Ear to the Ground

Taken altogether, the July TOP-NOTCH will lay away over any previous issue of the magazine, and we haven't yet struck our gait. The good things coming will make you open your eyes. J. G. St. Dare is writing a new "Clif Stirling" series, the first of which he promises for delivery at an early date, and a score of other well-known authors are hard at work on stories for us. We wish the magazine were larger, in order to give you more of these delightful stories, but in order to make it larger it would be necessary to increase the price. You are getting a great big five cents' worth now. Still—well, we're holding an ear close to the ground and listening—hard. What happens in the future will depend a great deal on the sort of sounds we hear. Make a noise like a hint.

Burt L. Standish

:: :: *ANOTHER BIG NUMBER OF THE* :: ::

TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

When Hall Rowed Stroke

By JOHN D. EMERSON

Hall was a professional joker, as well as the stroke oar of his crew, but he came near getting himself into a bad scrape when he attempted to execute his threat to decorate the chapel steeple of the rival school with the crimson oars of the victorious eight.

Billy White, Reformer

By JACK GORDON

The bullying captain and brutal mate of the *White Squall* finally got up against a tough customer when they attempted to manhandle Billy White, the stowaway, and the reformation which Billy brought about with his hard and nimble fists proved beneficial for all concerned.

Max Truman, Miler

By ERNEST A. YOUNG

The leading long yarn in the July issue of TOP-NOTCH will be the story of a Harvard man who was tempted to sell his birthright, and by dallying with temptation brought himself to be branded as a professional. This is another fine tale of college athletics, of the same class as "The Yellow Streak," which made such a hit with our readers. The magazine will also contain a fat installment of our fascinating serial of Western adventure,

The Deadwood Trail,

which grows better and better as it draws toward a close and Lang Strong approaches the goal of his ambition, the "Magic City" of the Black Hills.

How Dugan Regained His Nerve

By ROBERT A. LANE

A short story of the professional diamond, showing that players in the Big Leagues are often upset, and "put to the bad," by jealousies and heartburnings. Dugan finally demonstrated that he was built of the right stuff, and, by a single stroke of "the willow," again became the idol of the Chicago "fans."

When the Big Snake Celebrated

By ALBERT W. TOLMAN

A fifteen-foot python breaks loose from his cage and creates a tremendous sensation on Independence Day. The manner of his recapture at midnight is sensational enough. A lively short story.

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