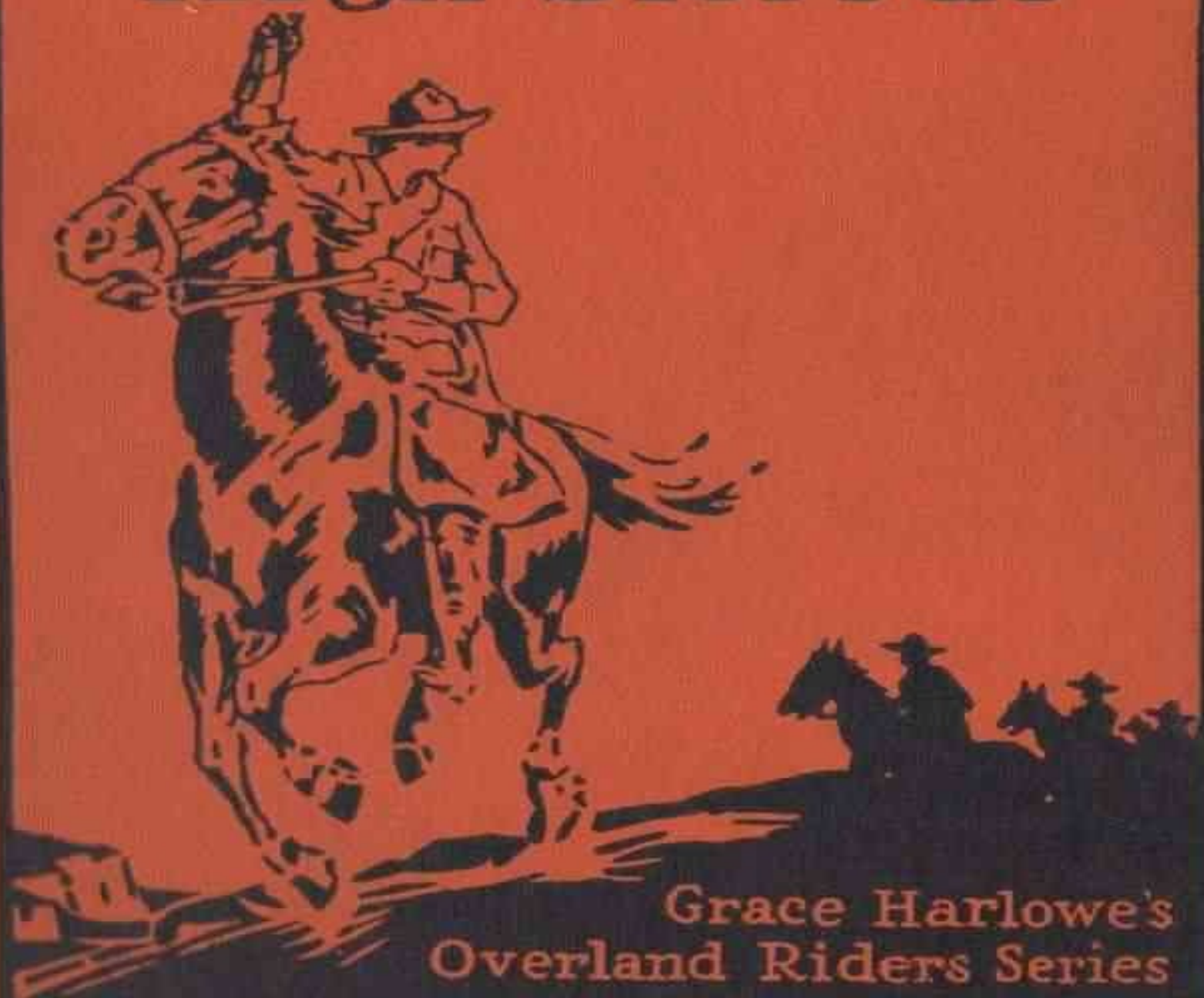


Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the High Sierras



Grace Harlowe's
Overland Riders Series

Jessie Graham Flower, A.M.

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“I’m Hit! Good Night!”

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders
in the High Sierras

by

Jessie Graham Flower, A. M.

Illustrated

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GRACE HARLOWE'S OVERLAND RIDERS IN THE HIGH SIERRAS

CHAPTER I

OLD FRIENDS GET TOGETHER

“Who is this Stacy Brown that you girls are speaking of?” questioned Emma Dean as the Overland girls sat down to dinner in Grace Harlowe’s hospitable Haven Home.

“He is my Hippy’s nephew,” Nora Wingate informed her. “You will like ‘Chunky,’ as he is known to his friends, and I promise you that he will keep this outfit from getting lonely,” added Nora laughingly.

“He was one of the members of the Pony Rider Boys’ outfit,” volunteered Grace. “You know we have heard of them several times on our journeyings. They used to go out in search of adventure every summer, so Stacy is a seasoned campaigner. We shall need him where we are going, too.”

“By the way, where are we going, Grace?” spoke up Elfreda Briggs. “I believe our destination is to be in the nature of a surprise—a mystery, as it were.”

“I just dote on mysteries,” bubbled Emma. “Of course I could have learned all about it had I not been too conscientious.”

“That is characteristic of your sex,” replied Hippy Wingate soberly. “May I ask you how you could have found out?”

“I thank you for the compliment, and regret exceedingly that I cannot return the compliment in kind. How could I have found out? Why, by the transmigration of thought.”

“The what?” cried Elfreda laughingly. “Is this some new freak, Emma Dean?”

“It may be new with me, but the principle is as old as the ages. I belong to the Society for the Promotion of Thought Transmigration. Our great and Most Worthy Master lives in Benares, India, where numbers of the faithful journey for instruction and inspiration once every two years.”

“Do you mean to say that you belong to that fool outfit?” wondered Hippy.

“I am happy to say that I do. I joined last winter, and, novice that I am, I have realized some remarkable results,” replied Emma.

“Nora, we ought to take her to a specialist before we start on our journey. It

won't do to have a crazy person with us. She might get us into no end of trouble," suggested Hippy.

"Humph! I'd much prefer to be crazy than to have a bungalow head," retorted Emma scornfully.

"A bungalow head?" exclaimed the girls.

"Yes. A bungalow has no upper story, you know."

"Ouch!" cried Hippy Wingate, clapping both hands to his head. "Now that our Sage of India has spoken, suppose Grace and Tom enlighten us as to where we are going this summer. In view of the fact that this is my treat—that I have offered to pay the expenses of the Overland Riders on this journey—it might not be inappropriate for me to inquire where we are going. Elfreda's question in that direction is as yet unanswered."

Tom Gray nodded to his wife.

"I had intended to wait until Stacy Brown arrived, but as he is not a member of our little organization, there is no reason why our business matters should be discussed with him," said Grace. "Dear friends, we are going to the High Sierras, the great snow-clad peaks of the far west. Adventure, hardship and health are awaiting us there. It will be a long journey before we reach the beginning of our real objective, but I believe you folks will agree with me that the preliminary journey is well worth while."

"You say that Hippy is paying the bills?" interjected Emma.

"He has so said. However, Tom will not have it that way, so we have agreed that Tom and Hippy shall share equally in the expense of the journey. Both feel quite rich now since they cleaned up on their big lumber deal in the North Woods," replied Grace.

Elfreda said that such an arrangement would not please her at all, declaring that she would pay her own expenses.

"You have nothing to say about it," laughed Tom. "The subject is closed. So far as our having Stacy Brown as our guest, is concerned, you all agreed to that when Grace wrote to you about his wish to join us on our summer outing. Are you still of the same mind?"

"Yes," answered the girls in chorus.

"What about a guide? Is that arranged for?" asked Miss Briggs.

"Not yet," answered Grace. "We thought we would leave that until we reached our destination. Oh, girls, I have some of the loveliest trips in mind for several seasons ahead, but I'm not going to tell you a word about them now. In the meantime, anyone that has a suggestion to offer will please offer it."

"I have no suggestions to offer, but I should like to ask further light on this new dope that Emma Dean has sprung on us. What is it, and how does it work?"

asked Hippy.

"If you won't make fun of me I'll tell you," replied Emma. "The transmigration of thought is 'tuning-in' one's mind to receive messages from the mind of another person, just as a wireless operator 'tunes-in' his instrument to catch the message being sent by another operator far away. In other words, persons so attuned to each other may converse, read each other's thoughts and hold communion, even though separated by thousands of miles of sea or land or both."

"Marvelous!" breathed Hippy. "For instance, please tune-in your mind and tell me what I am thinking about. Let's see you do that, if you can," he declared triumphantly.

"Our minds never could be in perfect accord, Theophilus Wingate. We are as far apart as the poles, but our range being so short, I can easily tell you what you are thinking about. Not being a deep thinker, you are as transparent as a piece of clear crystal."

"Emma, don't you say that about my Hippy," protested Nora indignantly. "My Hippy has a mind as big as his heart, and—"

"You are thinking," interjected Emma gravely, "what a shallow little butterfly I am, but what you do not know is that that thought is merely the reflection of your own mentality. You are, in other words, seeing yourself as others see you, Hippy Wingate."

A peal of laughter from the Overland girls greeted Emma's retort. Hippy flushed, then joined in the laughter.

"This is so sudden," he murmured. "I'll tell you what you do. Wait until Stacy arrives, then you just practice your transmigration stuff on him. Stacy will make a wonderful subject for you. He is so temperamental, so spiritual, that I am positive you and he will get wonderful results." Hippy winked at Nora as he said it.

None of the others had ever seen Stacy Brown, so they had not the least idea what was in store for them from the comedian of the Pony Rider Boys' outfit. Stacy was an old campaigner, however, and Hippy knew that he would prove a valuable member of their party on the ride into the High Sierras. Stacy knew the open, and with his companions had experienced many exciting adventures in the wilder parts of the country. The Overland Riders, too, had had their full share of thrilling adventure, first as members of the Overton College Unit in France during the great war, where Hippy Wingate had won honors as a fighting air pilot, and Tom Gray at the front as a captain of engineers. However, they had a new phase of excitement to experience in "Chunky" Brown, and the first of those experiences was near at hand.

A shot suddenly broke the summer stillness of Haven Home, a shot that brought the Overland Riders to their feet.

“Bang, bang, bang!”

“Merciful Heaven! Are we attacked?” cried Elfreda Briggs.

“Whoop! Yeo-o-o-o-o-w!”

Three more shots were fired, followed by a succession of startling whoops and yells.

“What does it mean? I’m afraid!” cried Emma.

The Overlanders ran out of the dining room to the veranda, but no one was in sight.

“Chunky has arrived. Don’t be afraid, girls,” laughed Hippy Wingate. “He is on the other side of the house. There he comes!”

A short, fat young fellow, riding a gray bronco and perched high on his saddle, at this juncture dashed around the end of the house, firing two shots into the air as he passed the amazed group. Just as he swept past, his sombrero fell off, but Chunky did not stop. In a minute or two he was back, and, making a graceful dip from the saddle, reached down for the hat. As he did so, the pony swerved and Stacy Brown landed on the grass of Haven Home, flopped over on his back, and after a few dazed seconds got up and shook himself.

Stacy made a low bow to the spectators gathered on the veranda.

“Oh, my dear, my dear! Are you hurt?” begged Nora, running to him.

“Hurt? Of course not. I always fall off before dinner. It puts a keen edge on my appetite. Hulloo, folks! Glad to meet ye. Hey, Bismarck! Come here,” he ordered.

His dusty gray pony trotted to him and nosed Stacy’s cheek affectionately.

“Got anything loose around the house? I’m half starved,” urged Chunky. “Uncle Hip, introduce me to these beautiful young ladies. I’ve heard of you folks, and so has Bismarck. You’ll find him right friendly, especially the front end of him, but I shouldn’t advise you to get too close to the tail end. He is very light there. Let him browse in the yard while I feed the inner man.”

“Indeed not,” objected Grace. “I am not going to have my flowers trampled down after all my hard work on them this spring. Tom, please lead Stacy’s pony around to the stables. I will put something on the table for you at once, Stacy. Come right in. We were just finishing dinner when you arrived so violently. Oh! Pardon me. You haven’t yet been introduced to the girls.”

“Thanks!” bowed Stacy. “Thanks for the invitation, but come to think of it don’t introduce me until after dinner. I never like to meet strangers on an empty stomach.”

“This is Miss Elfreda Briggs, a rising young lawyeress, and here is the life of

our Overland party, Miss Emma Dean. We address each other by our first names, so you may call her Emma. Come now, Stacy."

"You're a funny fellow, aren't you?" said Emma, surveying the newcomer curiously as they walked towards the house.

"Then we are a pair of 'em, eh?" chuckled the fat boy.

"I am not a boy, thank my lucky stars and all the saints," objected Emma. "I'll have you understand that, sir."

"Let the dove of peace rest over your touchy spirit, Emma," laughed Grace chidingly.

"It isn't a dove. It's a crow," corrected Chunky. "A thousand pardons, Emma dear. I—"

"I'm not your dear," answered Emma with considerable heat.

"Yes, you are, but you don't know it. To realize it you will have to emerge from the unconscious state in which you now so sweetly repose," teased Stacy, amid the laughter of the others.

"I should prefer to be unconscious all the time," flung back Emma.

"Ah! The food does smell good. Food always has a strange effect on me, and really, I haven't smelled any in almost a thousand years—not since breakfast this morning. By the way, where do we go and when do we start?"

"To the Sierras," answered Tom Gray. "How are you, Chunky?" he added, extending a hand.

"Starved. How's yourself?"

"I think after we go back to the dining room and after I have my dessert that I shall feel fit as a fiddle," replied Tom. "To answer the rest of your question, we expect to start tomorrow forenoon. The ponies will be shipped in a car that is now on the siding at Oakdale."

"Girls, what do you think of my nephew?" cried Hippy jovially, as they again seated themselves at the table.

"So far as I am concerned, I think that he is another of those bungalow fellows just like yourself, Hippy," answered Emma. "Mr. Brown, may I ask if you ever have had any experience with mental transmigration?" she asked, turning to Chunky.

Chunky, his mouth full of food, surveyed her solemnly.

"Uh-huh!" he replied thickly. "I met one of those animals once in the Rocky Mountains. You see it was this way. We had been riding far into the night to find a suitable camping place, when we were suddenly halted by a savage growl just ahead of us. I went on ahead, with my trusty rifle ready, to slay the beast whatever it might be. Suddenly I saw him. He was the most terrible looking object that I've ever come up with in all my mountain experience. I threw up my

rifle and shot the beast dead in his tracks.”

“Wonderful!” breathed Emma. “But what has that to do with mental transmigration?”

“I’m coming to that. It is wonderful—I mean it was. Will you believe it, that terrible beast came to life. Yes, sir, he rose right up and made for us. My pony bolted, and I fell off—just as I ordinarily do before meal time. My feet at the moment chanced to be out of the stirrups and I fell off. Well, I might have been killed—I surely would have been killed, but I wasn’t, just because of that stunt that you mentioned. I transmigrated myself out of that vicinity with a speed that left that terrible object so far behind that he just lay down and died again,” finished Stacy Brown solemnly, amid shouts of laughter, in which all but Emma Dean joined.

Stacy gave her a quick sidelong glance, and Hippy Wingate, observing the look, knew that war had been declared between Stacy Brown and Emma Dean.

CHAPTER II

AN INTERRUPTED SLEEP

“Right at this point,” said the traveling salesman impressively, “a train left the track and plunged into that ravine down there.”

“Any loss of life?” questioned Tom Gray.

“A great many. I was in that wreck myself. I was shaken up a bit, that’s all. You see I know how to take care of myself. We commercial travelers have to or we should soon be out of business. Nearly the whole train went into that ravine, and the car in which I was riding stood on end. I clung to the air-brake cord and thus was miraculously saved.”

“Humph!” muttered Stacy, hunching his fat shoulders forward. “You don’t look to be light enough to perch on an air-brake cord.”

The Overland girls glanced amusedly at Chunky and the traveling salesman. The entire party was enjoying the late afternoon mountain air from the rear platform of the observation car on the transcontinental train known as the Red Limited. Just inside the door sat other passengers, who had been enjoying the frequent passages-at-arms between Stacy Brown and Emma Dean. The train had been rumbling over bridges and lurching through narrow cuts, affording the passengers brief views of a swiftly moving scenic panorama of interest and attractiveness.

“As I was saying, the rope, in all probability, saved my life, as I was the only person in the car that came out alive,” continued the traveling salesman. “I’m in ladies’ fine shoes, you know.”

Stacy and Emma regarded the speaker’s large feet, glanced at each other and grinned.

“I’ll bet you couldn’t transmigrate them,” whispered the fat boy.

Emma elevated her nose, but made no reply to the trivial remark.

“I mean that I am selling ladies’ fine shoes, young man,” added the salesman, he having observed the fat boy’s grin. “My card.” He passed business cards to those nearest to him, and from them the Overlanders learned that he was William

Sylvester Holmes, traveling for a Denver shoe firm. “My trade call me ‘Bill,’” he explained.

“Hello, Bill!” muttered Hippy, nudging Nora.

“May I ask what car you were in?” questioned a tall, bronzed passenger in a mild, apologetic voice.

“The same as this one.”

“Hm-m-m! That’s odd. I do not recall having seen you. However, I was in the other end of the car, which perhaps accounts for it,” said the stranger in a more humble voice.

William Sylvester flushed. Instead of being overcome, however, he shifted his conversation to another train wreck that he said had occurred a few miles further on at a place called Summit.

The faces of the Overland Riders expanded into discreet smiles at the mild way in which the tall man had rebuked the loquacious traveler. Grace and Elfreda, in particular, found themselves much interested in this big man. Grace asked a fellow passenger who the man was, and learned that he was Bill Ford, for some years sheriff of Sonora County. Ford had been observing the traveling salesman through mild blue eyes in which there appeared an expression of more than casual interest.

“It was that Summit wreck that nearly did me up,” resumed Holmes. “We went over an embankment there. Being in a berth in a sleeping car I was unable to grab hold of anything. The car played football with me, but I came off with nothing more serious than a broken arm. Oh, I have had my experiences! Were you in that wreck, too?” he asked, turning quickly to the sheriff.

“Never heard of it,” answered Ford carelessly.

“All that saved us was the fact that the cars were made of steel. We’ll pass Summit within the hour, and I’ll show you where we went off the rails that time.”

“Tell us about something that happened when the train didn’t leave the rails,” urged Stacy.

“With pleasure. I remember, some two years ago—it was this very train, I do believe—when a party of bandits held up a train on this line. That occurred between Summit and Gardner. They uncoupled the express car and, after compelling the engineer to haul it up the track a short distance, dynamited the car and robbed it of the treasure it was carrying.”

“They’ve been cutting up that same kind of caper quite lately,” nodded the sheriff.

“Di—id they rob the passengers?” stammered Emma Dean.

“In some of the cars, yes. In my car they did not. I held them off with my

revolver. I——”

“That was very careless of you. Why, sir, you might have shot yourself,” cried Stacy.

Mr. Holmes gave the fat boy a withering glance and resumed his story.

“After my display of courage the other passengers got brave, and with their assistance I drove the bandits off. However, I should not advise it. For the average person, the safe course is to sit still and take his medicine. Gentlemen, never offer resistance when a gang of bandits orders you to put up your hands, but put them up as fast as you can and let them stay put,” he added, fixing his gaze on Tom Gray who smiled and nodded.

“Yes, sir,” agreed Chunky. “That’s the way I always do.”

“Were you ever held up?” questioned the salesman.

“Many times. I put up my hands too, but there was a gun in both of ’em,” answered Stacy amid much laughter.

At this juncture a passenger asked the storyteller to tell them more about the hold-up, which he did without urging.

“The train in question was carrying a treasure, just as this one no doubt is. The bandits had obtained information of this fact from a confederate. They were right on the job when the train came along. After stopping the train they placed men at the car door to take up a collection from the passengers. All submitted tamely, as they should have done, except in the car where I was, and—we are approaching Summit now. From that point we go down grade for twenty miles or so, then we begin to climb again. We stop at Summit.”

“Isn’t it terrible, all that banditry. I’m afraid,” shivered Emma when a little later the party had gone to the dining car for supper.

“For one who can transmigrate as well as you can, there should be no fear,” suggested Hippy. “Just transmigrate the bandits to some other train.”

“I think we should transmigrate ourselves in the event of such a thing occurring,” vouchsafed Elfreda Briggs.

Sheriff Ford came into the dining car shortly after the train had left Summit, and nodded at the party in a friendly fashion.

“What has become of our story-telling friend, sir?” asked Grace.

“I saw him go into the smoking car ahead as the train was leaving Summit. He sent two telegrams before leaving. This shoe business requires a lot of telegraphing, it appears,” added the sheriff dryly.

“How do you know it was about shoe business?” demanded Stacy.

“Because I happened to see the last telegram.”

Tom Gray eyed the sheriff inquiringly, but the mild blue eyes of Mr. Ford conveyed nothing to him.

After a pleasant evening, during which they saw no more of the traveling salesman, the Overland party retired to their berths for sleep. Forward, near the express car, rode the Overlanders' ponies in as much comfort as is possible to provide for animals en route. At every stop during the day one of the men of the party had run forward to look over the car of "stock," as the riders called their saddle animals. Now, however, all were too soundly asleep to think of ponies, and above the rumble of the train might be heard the rasping snores of Stacy Brown and Hippy Wingate.

It was shortly after one o'clock in the morning when many of the sleepers were awakened by a sudden disconcerting jolt caused by an abrupt application of the air brakes. The train slowly settled down to a slow crawl, the hiss of the air from the brakes being plainly audible to those who had been awakened.

The train stopped. Nothing of an alarming nature seemed to have occurred, so the nervous passengers again settled down into their blankets, for the night air was chill and penetrating. Others lay awake, but there was nothing to hear except the snores which continued without interruption.

A few moments of this and then a subdued murmur of voices was heard just ahead of the Overlanders' car. A brief period of silence followed the murmur, then a man's voice, agitated and full of alarm, was raised so high that almost every person in the car was awake on the instant.

"What is it?" cried a woman's voice from behind berth curtains.

"We're held up! The train is held up!" cried the man.

"Robbers! Robbers!" screamed the woman who had asked the question; and a chorus of frightened voices took up the refrain.

CHAPTER III

THE HOLD-UP OF THE RED LIMITED

“Take it easy! Don’t lose your heads. We are safe for the moment,” urged a voice that sounded like Sheriff Ford’s. Whoever it was, his words brought a measure of quiet to the excited passengers who were shivering in the aisle in scant attire.

The passengers then sought their berths again and began dressing, for there would be no more sleep for them that night. Outside of the car there was not the slightest indication that anything out of the ordinary was occurring. An ominous stillness enshrouded the scene. Some one, more curious than the rest, stepped to the front platform of the sleeping car and, opening the vestibule door, looked out. The Overlanders learned later that it was Mr. Ford.

A rifle shot roared out, whereupon the sheriff prudently stepped back and closed the door. Several smothered screams were heard, and then silence once more settled over the car.

Up to the present time not a word had been heard from the Overland Riders. The curtains of their berths hung motionless, and Stacy Brown’s snores were louder than ever. Perhaps they were all asleep, but how that could be possible in the circumstances it would be difficult to understand.

The voice of Sheriff Ford once more focused the attention of the passengers on him.

“Men,” he said, addressing the passengers from one end of the car, “this train is being held up, but it does not look as if the passengers will be disturbed. If they are not, it means that the bandits are after the express car, in which, as I happen to know, there is a large amount of gold for shipment to the Pacific Coast for export. I am an officer of the law. The fact that I am not in my own county is sufficient excuse for my sitting down and letting the bandits have their own way, but I’m not that kind of a critter. I’m going out to take a hand in this affair, and I ask all the men in this car, who have weapons, to join me. Provided we get help from the other cars of the train, we can, perhaps, drive the robbers off. How

many of you men are with me?”

Two passengers stepped out from their berths. The curtains of the berths occupied by Lieutenant Theophilus Wingate and Captain Tom Gray were thrust aside, the curtain hooks rattling on the rods overhead, and they were revealed clad in shirts, trousers and boots, each with a revolver strapped on, sitting quietly on the edge of his berth.

“Isn’t there another *man* in this car?” questioned Ford sarcastically.

At this juncture Grace Harlowe, Elfreda Briggs, Nora Wingate and Emma Dean stepped out into the aisle, each wearing a revolver at her side, and Emma very pale and shaking in the chill air.

“We are not men, but we are ready to do whatever you wish, Mr. Ford,” announced Grace.

Ford smiled and nodded.

“I thought so,” he said. “This appears to be about all we can depend upon. As for you young women, my hat is off to you, but this is no job for women. It’s a man’s job. What you can do, however, is to mount guard over this car and protect the other women. Can you all shoot?”

Grace said they could.

“Very well. Guard the vestibules, but in no circumstances open the vestibule door. The other passengers will please remain in their berths to avoid the possibility of being shot, and you young women will be careful that you do not shoot the train crew. Challenge first, then shoot, if you are not positive as to who any person is. Have you men ammunition?”

“Yes,” answered Hippy. “Lead us to it. We haven’t had any action in so long that we are going stale.”

“We will go out by the rear door,” announced the sheriff. “Please do not use your weapons until you are ordered to do so. The most we can hope to accomplish is to drive the bandits off—make them think they are attacked by a posse. There isn’t much chance of our being able to capture the gang or any of them, much as I should like to do so. Yet I’m going to try to get hold of at least one. All ready!”

“Be careful, Hippy darling,” begged Nora as the little party moved towards the rear of the car.

“You watch my smoke,” chuckled Hippy.

“Good luck,” smiled Grace, waving a kiss to Tom as he turned to nod in return for her parting words.

Ford stepped out into the rear vestibule and peered through the window into the darkness.

“I’ll go first,” he said. “You follow when I give the signal. Not a word from

any of you. Wait!” Lifting the trap-door in the vestibule floor, the sheriff let himself down on the steps, then cautiously stood up on the outside, revolver in hand for use in case of trouble.

“Come out!” he commanded in a low voice. “There appears to be no one here. There goes the express car!” he added as a slight jolt of the train was heard. “They’ve cut out that car and are going to pull it up the track a piece and force it open. We’ll have to hurry.”

Ford started on a run, the others falling in behind him.

Up to this time no one had given Stacy Brown a thought, but as the party was leaving the sleeper something awakened him. Then Stacy heard someone say, “robbers!” The fat boy tumbled out into the aisle in his pajamas.

“Wha—what is it?” he demanded sleepily.

“The train is held up,” answered Grace.

“Oh! Wow!”

“Yes, and Tom, Hippy and Mr. Ford, with two other passengers, have just gone out by the rear door to see what they can do to help us out,” announced Miss Briggs. “You are a fine brave fellow to sleep through all this uproar.”

“They have gone to capture the bandit outfit and get their heads shot off for their pains,” jeered the voice of a male passenger from the forward end of the car.

“You’re a brave man, aren’t you?” chided Emma, directing her remark at Stacy.

The fat boy blinked sleepily, then all of a sudden he woke up to a fuller realization of the situation. Emma’s remark had passed unnoticed, but the taunt of the cowardly passenger had sent the blood pounding to Stacy’s temples. The boy snatched his revolver from his grip and buckled on the holster, starting for the rear door at a run.

“We can’t all be heroes,” he flung back at the passenger who had jeered at the Overlanders. “Some of us are born cowards with a stripe of yellow a yard wide through us. Go to sleep, children! I’ll bag the lot of ’em and fetch ’em back for you to look at.”

Stacy fell through the opening in the platform, the trap-door still being open. In the fall, he bumped all the way from the platform to the ground, where he fetched up heavily in a sitting posture.

“Hey, you fellows! Where are you? Wait for me, I’m on the way,” he bellowed. “I’ve got the medicine with me. Sing out where you are.”

The fat boy started to run along the side of the train. He could not see his companions, but he was positive that they could not be far in advance of him.

“W-a-i-t!” he shouted.

“Who’s that?” demanded Ford sharply.

“It sounds like Brown of our party,” laughed Hippy.

“For goodness sake, go back and stop his noise or we’ll have the robbers down on us,” urged Ford. “Run for it!”

Hippy started back at a brisk trot, on the alert for the presence of bandit sentries. He nearly collided with Stacy, and, knowing that the fat boy was impulsive, Hippy feared that Stacy might take him for a train robber and shoot, so he dropped down the instant he discovered his companion.

“Stop that noise! Do you want to get hurt?” demanded Hippy sternly.

“Course I don’t. I want to hurt a robber. Where are they?”

“You will find out soon enough if you don’t keep quiet.”

“That’s what I’m making a noise about. I want to call ’em out; then you’ll see what Stacy Brown and his little gun can do.”

“You are not to use your revolver until Mr. Ford gives you permission to do so. He is in command of our party. The bandits are supposed to be somewhere ahead of us. Come along, but don’t you dare make a sound. Where have you been all the time?”

“Sleeping. Isn’t that what folks buy sleeping car tickets for?”

“Hurry,” urged Hippy, who ran on, followed by Stacy, stumbling and grunting, making enough noise to be heard several car-lengths away. The two came up with the others of their party at the front end of the forward car, where Ford had halted.

“Where are they?” demanded Stacy. “I’m ready to capture the whole bunch. All I want now is to be shown. I’m a wild-cat for trouble when I get stirred up.”

“Silence, young man! I’ll do all the talking necessary. You will get your wish for action soon enough, and I reckon you’ll get some of the brag taken out of you, too,” retorted Ford sarcastically.

“Not if I see ’em first,” gave back Stacy belligerently.

“What is the order, Mr. Ford?” questioned Tom Gray.

“We will go off to one side. It won’t do to follow the railroad tracks. To do so would surely draw the fire of the bandits. There are several on guard not far from us,” he added in a whisper, having been observing closely as he talked. “I think I now know the lay of the land. Be careful, all of you. If you will look sharp you will see that the bandits have the treasure car near the mouth of the ravine that leads up into the mountains.”

“They’ve taken our stock car too,” groaned Stacy.

“That’s so. The ponies are gone, Ford,” whispered Lieutenant Wingate.

“I reckon they count on making a get-away on your horses,” answered the sheriff. “We’ll be able to block that game, I hope. Come!”

After having walked some distance parallel with the tracks, the sheriff's party slowed down at a signal from their leader. Lanterns were seen moving about beside the tracks a short distance ahead of the sheriff. The safety valve of the engine was blowing off steam, the blow-off growing to a deafening roar that died down only when the engine pulled away from the express, baggage and stock cars. The locomotive came to a stop a short distance from the three cars, then the sound of a heavy object beating against the side door of one of the cars, was heard.

"They're trying to smash in the door of the express car," whispered Ford.

A volley of shots was fired at the car door by the bandits and was promptly answered by shots from within the car. The men in the express car appeared to be vigorously resisting the attack. They were firing at the band outside with such good effect that the robbers soon ceased their attempts to beat in the door with the section of a telegraph pole that they were using for the purpose. A period of silence followed while the bandits were holding a hurried consultation; then followed a movement among them.

"Let me shoot! They're getting away, I tell you," urged Stacy excitedly.

"Not yet, young man. Those fellows are up to more mischief, and I think I know what it is," answered Ford in a tense voice. "Men, we must get in and get in at once or we shall be too late. It is time to move. Listen to me, then obey promptly."

CHAPTER IV

IN A LIVELY SKIRMISH

"We will crawl across the tracks between the engine and the cars," whispered the sheriff. "Once on the other side we must get to the rear of the bandits, and as soon as we find cover there we shall begin to shoot. I hope we may be in time. When we reach the other side of the rails I wish you men to spread out, but I want to know where every man of our party is."

Ford started at a run, the others following, fully as eager as the sheriff to get into action. They had barely reached the rails when there occurred a sudden, blinding flash, followed by a heavy report.

"Dynamite!" exclaimed Ford. "I expected that."

"Our poor ponies," groaned Tom Gray.

"If they get near my Bismarck he'll kick the everlasting daylights out of them," growled Stacy Brown.

"Can't we do something?" urged Hippy.

"Yes. We're going to do something and do it right quick," answered Ford grimly. "Fellows, remember that the bandits have rifles, while we have only our revolvers. You look out for those rifles, is my best advice to you."

They reached the other side of the railroad tracks without loss of time and without attracting attention to themselves, and it was soon evident to the sheriff's party that the dynamite had not accomplished its purpose. The explosive had not been well placed, and the express car had been little damaged, though a hole had been dug out beside the tracks from the force of it.

"When I give the word, shoot, but shoot over their heads," commanded Ford incisively. "Spread out and get down on your stomachs when you have taken your positions. Get going!"

The men of the party crept along, skulking through the bushes that grew on the mountain side along the railroad right of way. One by one the members of the party dropped down and lay awaiting the word of command. Every now and then a shot would be fired from the interior of the express car, answered in each

instance by a volley from the bandits.

The preparations of Sheriff Ford up to this time had been made swiftly. The signal agreed upon for beginning the attack on the train bandits was two quick shots from Ford's revolver.

The thin line of assailants waited in tense silence for the beginning of hostilities. The members of the little party were steady, although their pulses beat high, for no one deluded himself into the belief that this affair was going to be wholly one-sided.

Two sharp reports from Ford's revolver, even though eagerly looked for, came so unexpectedly that every member of the party was startled, but their panic lasted for only a few seconds. Six heavy revolvers answered the signal. Three bullets sped harmlessly over the heads of the men who were trying to rob the express car. Three other bullets from the weapons of Ford, Tom and Hippy, by arrangement at the last moment before the party spread out, had been fired low enough to reach the legs of the bandits.

Of course there could be no fine shooting on account of the darkness, but the sheriff and the two men with him did very well indeed, if the yells of rage that came from the bandits could be depended upon as indication of hits.

"Down!" warned Ford when the revolvers had been emptied. Every man in the party well knew what was coming.

The expected was not long in arriving. A volley of heavy rifle shots ripped over the heads of the sleeping-car party. Ford's party quickly reloaded as they lay; then began firing as rapidly as they could pull the triggers of their weapons, aiming whenever they saw anything to aim at.

During all this firing the orders of the sheriff were implicitly followed. Tom Gray and Lieutenant Wingate were as steady as rock, for they had been through skirmishes before. Stacy was a little excited, but more from eagerness to be up and at the bandits than from fear. The bandits were getting desperate. On account of the interruption there had been no opportunity to explode another charge of dynamite under the express car, and they were now too fully engaged to proceed with that work.

The desperadoes knew very well from the sound that the attackers were using small arms instead of rifles, thus leaving the advantage with the bandits so far as weapons were concerned. The robbers now began creeping stealthily up the slope, firing at every flash from a revolver, but Ford's party was keeping so low that there was no great danger of any one being hit except as they changed positions and ran for fresh cover, which they always did following a volley from the bandits' rifles. The sheriff's party was giving ground slowly, constantly changing positions under his orders, the officer himself now and then running

along the line, giving quick low-spoken orders, without regard to his own safety.

The bandits had been drawn away from the tracks for some distance when Ford dropped down beside Hippy Wingate, who was firing from behind a small boulder.

“What is it, Sheriff?” questioned Hippy.

“I have a plan,” answered Ford.

“Good! What is it?”

“Our revolvers won’t hold them back much longer. Should they rush us someone is certain to get hit. In any event we shall then have to run for it. I don’t like to do that.”

“Not yet,” answered Hippy with emphasis.

“I think we may be able to save your horses and the express car if you are willing to take a long chance.”

“I have taken so many already that chances no longer are a novelty. What is it you wish me to do?” demanded Hippy.

“Go to the engineer and tell him to back up. Tell him to hit those three cars as hard as he dares—hit them as fast as he can without throwing them from the rails or injuring the horses. Having done that, let him back down the grade as quietly as possible so those fellows won’t notice him. When he hits the express car he is to keep on backing until he reaches the train, which he is to push back a full half mile, and then stop and wait for us to finish our job. When we have done that we will fire a signal—three shots at intervals. I reckon the moon will soon be up so we can see what we are doing. Tell the engineer, too, that we will fire the same signal if we approach him, but, should he see anybody coming up who does not give that signal, he is to start up his engine and reverse for all he’s worth. Get me?”

“I get you, Buddy.”

“I would go myself, but I am needed here. When the time comes we shall have to make a sharp get-away ourselves, but if we save the train that will be enough. Do you think you can reach the locomotive?”

“Surest thing you know, old top,” answered Hippy laughingly.

“Be careful! You will find that the engine is guarded, but I don’t believe there will be more than two men guarding it, and perhaps this firing may have drawn them away, though I hardly think so.”

“Leave it to me.”

“Should you miss us on your return, make for the train as fast as you can. You’re the right sort, Lieutenant. Pick your own trail and the best o’ luck.”

Lieutenant Wingate was off a few seconds later, running cautiously, now and then flattening himself on the ground to avoid the occasional volley. Hippy had

no fear of the bullets that whistled over him, though he had a sufficiently intimate acquaintance with such missiles to hold them in high respect. That was why he dropped to the ground when firing was resumed. In a few moments he was out of range of the firing. He then straightened up and ran with all speed, parallel with the tracks, but keeping several rods to one side.

As he neared the locomotive Hippy proceeded with more caution. The night was now sufficiently light to enable him to see the figures of two men sitting on the bank beside the tracks on the right side of the engine. There was no special need for vigilance on their part now, for ahead of the locomotive a telegraph pole had been felled across the tracks, while to its rear were the cars and the bandits. All this made the guards somewhat careless so that they failed to see a figure dart across the tracks a few rods back of the locomotive tender.

Lieutenant Wingate crept along under the overhang of the tender, on the side opposite from the two guards. He did not know but there might be men on that side also, but soon discovered that there were not. He had crawled to the running board, by which entrance is gained to the locomotive cab, before he was discovered by the fireman.

“Sh-h-h-h!” warned Hippy just in time to check an exclamation that was on the lips of the fireman. “Lean over. I have a message for you—for the engineer. Don’t make a quick move, but just settle down. You might fire up the boiler a little. With the glare from the fire in their eyes those two fellows won’t see quite so clearly.”

The fireman, after a whispered word to the engineer, opened the fire door and threw in fresh coal, then crouched down with his ear close to the Overland Rider, whereupon Hippy briefly explained Sheriff Ford’s plan, at the same time acquainting the fireman with the situation to the rear.

Another whispered conversation across the boiler between engineer and fireman followed, with Hippy Wingate clinging on the step of the locomotive in tense expectancy. A sudden hiss of steam from the cylinders on both sides of the engine startled him, and the big drive wheels began slipping on the rails.

“Hey there! What are ye up to?” yelled a guard, making a leap for the running board.

The fireman responded by hieing a chunk of coal, which caught the bandit in the stomach, laying the fellow flat in the ditch beside the tracks. The remaining guard fired point-blank without effect at the engineer’s window, but the driver’s head was below the level of the cab window at that instant. The wheels gained a foothold, the engine began backing rapidly while the guard continued to shoot at the reversing hulk of steel.

“Good for you, Buddies!” cried Hippy enthusiastically.

The engineer did not slow down as he approached the scene of the hold-up, knowing that there were no persons in the way.

Hippy had dropped off before the engine gained much headway, and rolled over into the ditch and soon heard the tender hit the express car.

The bandits had heard the engine rumbling down the grade, but they were too busy shooting at Sheriff Ford's party to be able to spare the time to interfere. In the meantime a new note had been added to the battle. The train crew, now taking courage, had gone to the assistance of the Sheriff, armed with revolvers, shot guns, iron bars and whatever else they could lay their hands on.

Grace Harlowe and her friends, in the meantime, however, remained on guard, and not even the trainmen could have got into her sleeping car without giving an account of themselves to the Overland girls.

The firing now grew fast and furious. Hippy heard it, listened attentively and realized that his little party was being assisted.

"I must get back and take a hand," he muttered, making a wide detour with the intention of coming in to the rear of Sheriff Ford and his men. To do this he ran up the ravine from the railroad, near where the attack had been made.

Lieutenant Wingate had not proceeded far before he heard what sounded like hoof-beats. At first he feared that the ponies of his outfit had been taken; then he realized that this could not be the case.

The ravine in which he found himself was now fairly well lighted by the rising moon, and discovery was certain, the banks on either side being so steep that the Overlander knew that he could not look for escape that way. Not caring to be caught in a trap, Hippy turned and began to retreat down the ravine, then halted abruptly, as he discovered a horseman coming up the ravine at a gallop. A man was running just ahead of the rider, the latter calling orders to the runner.

At this juncture, Lieutenant Wingate unlimbered his revolver and waited. The two men saw him, and the runner pointed to him, then dashed right past Hippy, shielding his face with a hand. As he passed, the runner fired a shot at Hippy.

"I know you!" yelled the Overlander, sending a bullet into the ground behind the runner. "I know your game, you scoundrel!"

Hippy, for the moment, apparently had forgotten the man on horseback, who was now to the rear of him, for Lieutenant Wingate, upon discovering the identity of the man on foot, was so amazed that all other thoughts took flight.

All at once the Overland Rider remembered. He wheeled like a flash and fired at the figure that was now towering over him. A blow, crushing in its force, came down on the head of the Overland Rider, felling him to the ground. The butt of a rifle in the hands of the horseman was the instrument that caused Hippy's undoing.

In the meantime, while Hippy was carrying Ford's message to the engineer of the Red Limited, the hot reception they were getting led the bandits to give up the fight and scatter. It was one of the fleeing train-robbers who had struck Lieutenant Wingate down.

CHAPTER V

ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING

“Have the train draw up here and wait for us,” Sheriff Ford directed, as the trainmen were about to return to their train after the bandits had finally been driven off. “Those ruffians have had enough, and won’t come back. Some of them are wounded, too.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” asked a trainman.

“No. I’m going to look for Lieutenant Wingate. He may be on the train, but, if he is not, have the engineer give us three whistles.”

“Hippy wouldn’t go back without us,” declared Tom Gray with emphasis.

“Go back to your train, men, while we look for our friend,” urged Sheriff Ford.

The train crew lost no time in following Ford’s advice, being eager to get away from that locality. Stacy Brown was sent back with them to put on his clothes. Stacy was shivering in his pajamas, but the fat boy had done his duty as steadily as any of his companions, and fully proven his courage, thus winning the admiration of Sheriff Ford and Tom Gray. The two other volunteer passengers, one a salesman for a Chicago grocery house, the other a Colorado ranchman, announced their intention of remaining with the sheriff to assist him in his search.

Shortly after the departure of the trainmen, three long blasts of the locomotive whistle told the party that Lieutenant Wingate had not returned to the train.

“That settles it, men. It is up to us to get to work,” declared the sheriff. Ford divided his forces and sent parties in various directions to search for the missing Hippy Wingate, hoping, and partly believing, that the lieutenant had probably met up with the bandits on their retreat into the mountains after abandoning their attack on the train, and secreted himself somewhere in the vicinity of the attempted hold-up.

The Overlanders were now in the Sierras, and the country all about them was wild and uninhabited. After surveying his surroundings with critical eyes, Ford

took to the ravine up which Hippy had gone in attempting to get back to his companions, and soon found the place where the bandits had staked down their horses.

Two warning whistles, the engineer's regular signal that the train was about to start ahead, caused the sheriff to run down the ravine to the railroad, at the same time firing three shots to recall his companions.

"Get aboard in a hurry!" shouted the conductor, leaning from the engine cab as the train came back to the scene of the attempted robbery.

"Wait! Has Lieutenant Wingate returned?" demanded Ford.

"No!" shouted Stacy Brown from the platform of the smoking car. "Didn't you find him?"

"Are you positive, Stacy?" called Tom Gray, running up at this juncture.

"He is not on the train, Tom," answered Grace Harlowe from a vestibule doorway. "The engineer said he dropped off just as the engine began backing down. Tom, you must search for Hippy. Nora is nearly wild from worry over him."

"We are going to find him, little woman," answered Captain Gray.

"Are you folks going to get aboard?" demanded the conductor insistently.

"No. We're not going to leave that man here by a long shot," retorted Ford.

"All right. Stay if you want to. We're going ahead," snapped the conductor.

"Stop!" ordered the sheriff. "You hold this train until I give you leave to move it. I am an officer of the law, and in command here for the present. Captain Gray, what do you wish to do?"

"Find the lieutenant, Sheriff."

"Then, would it not be a good idea to unload your ponies?" asked Ford. "We may have to be here until tomorrow, and perhaps make a long journey into the interior, which we cannot well do on foot."

"Yes. We will unload enough animals to carry your party," answered Tom.

"Pull your train up to the mouth of the ravine and stop," commanded Ford, clambering aboard the locomotive. "Get aboard there, boys."

The train promptly pulled ahead while the sheriff had his final argument with the conductor in the locomotive cab. The argument was brief, but heated, the sheriff laying down the law to the angry conductor, who, by the time his train had reached the mouth of the ravine, was wholly subdued.

The Overland Riders stepped off the train to watch the unloading of the ponies and to get instructions from Tom and Mr. Ford.

"We are about twenty-five miles from Gardner," said the sheriff, addressing Grace. "You people, I believe, intend to detrain there. Have someone unload your stock and then wait until we return. You will find a very fair little hotel at

Gardner.”

“We will wait,” answered Grace composedly.

Ford called upon the train crew to assist in unloading the ponies. Unloading boards were obtained from the baggage car with which a rather substantial gangway was constructed, and down it the light-footed ponies—five of them—were led without the least difficulty. Rifles and light equipment for the party were unloaded, the rest of the Overlanders’ property and two ponies being left on the train.

While the unloading was in progress Tom Gray went to the dining car and purchased provisions, consisting of canned goods, pork and beans and a side of bacon. Stacy Brown, who had gone back to the sleeping car for something he wanted from his suitcase, dropped in while Tom was bartering, and helped his companion carry back their purchases. By the time they reached the head of the train all was in readiness for the departure.

Ford waved the lantern that he had borrowed from the conductor.

“Go ahead,” he called to the conductor. “Mrs. Gray, don’t forget to report to Gardner what has become of us. If we are not back in two days have them send a posse for us.”

“I understand,” answered Grace Harlowe.

“I say, you! You might have Emma do a little transmigrating for us while we’re away. I reckon we’ll be needing it,” called back Stacy.

As the train pulled out, the passengers, including the girls of the Overland party, were gathered on the platforms cheering. The searching party now consisted, besides Sheriff Ford, of Tom Gray, Stacy Brown and the two passengers who had been with them from the first, making five in all.

“Now, sir, what is your plan?” demanded Tom after they had saddled and made ready to start.

“I think we will follow up the ravine for a little way,” answered the sheriff. “Your man went this way. I know because the fireman saw him take to the ravine. One of you lead my horse; I’m going ahead on foot with the lantern.”

“If you have no objection, I will go with you,” offered Tom.

Ford nodded, and the two started away, the others, on the ponies, keeping well to the rear.

The two men in advance finally reached the point in the ravine where Lieutenant Wingate had been struck down. With lantern held close to the ground, the sheriff went over it on hands and knees, examining every foot of the ground.

“Stand where you are until I come back,” he directed, addressing Tom Gray. “Do you recognize this?” he asked, holding up a hat, upon his return a few moments later.

“It is the lieutenant’s hat,” answered Tom promptly, and Stacy Brown agreed with him.

“What’s the use of a hat without a head to wear it?” demanded Stacy.

“This!” replied Ford. “I have proved one thing. Our man came this way, but beyond this point the only trace of him is the hat. Unless I am much mistaken, he left here on the back of a horse, and he went that way.” The sheriff pointed up the ravine. “It is fair to assume that he did not go voluntarily. The only inference possible, then, is that he has been taken.”

“Captured by the bandits!” exclaimed Tom.

Ford nodded.

“For what reason?”

“Candidly, I don’t know, Captain. We have got to find out, and it is advisable for us to go in search of the answer to that question as fast as we can. We will mount and move on.”

“I suppose I am the one who will have to furnish the brains for this party and find the missing man,” declared Stacy pompously, but no one laughed at his sally.

A minute later they were mounted and on their way up the ravine, the sheriff still carrying the lantern, which he held low, keeping his gaze constantly on the trail, which still was fairly plain and easy for an experienced man to follow. Stacy dropped behind a little way and produced a plum pudding can from his pocket. Opening the can, he calmly proceeded to eat the pudding.

“What’s that you’re eating?” demanded one of the two passengers.

“Pudding. A plum one.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Oh, back there in the diner,” answered Stacy carelessly.

“You stole a pudding, eh?” laughed the questioner.

“Oh, my; no, sir. How could you think such a thing? Don’t you know I wouldn’t do anything like that?”

“Oh! You paid for it,” nodded the passenger.

“I did not. Captain Gray did. You see it was this way. The captain paid for six cans of baked beans, but they gave him only five cans. The colored gentleman in the diner cheated us out of one can, and probably pocketed the difference, so I sort of helped myself to a pudding to even things up.”

“Humph! You are a young man of unusual ability. You should have been a lawyer.”

“I know it,” admitted Chunky.

An exclamation from Ford interrupted the conversation. The sheriff had picked up a handkerchief which Tom thought belonged to Hippy Wingate. They

believed that the lieutenant had dropped it purposely, knowing full well that pursuit would follow promptly when his friends discovered that he was missing.

"We are on the trail all right," cried the sheriff. "Look sharp and don't make much noise about it, either."

Daybreak found the outfit still in the saddle. Now that they could see, Ford threw away the lantern, and, after watering their ponies at a mountain spring, they pressed on with all speed. The men ate a cold breakfast in the saddle, there being no time to waste in halting to cook breakfast. Further, the smoke from a camp-fire would be a danger signal to the men for whom they were searching.

About nine o'clock in the morning the sheriff and Tom found a split-trail. The two trails led up a steep incline to a small plateau. There they discovered the remains of a camp-fire. Ford dismounted and ran his fingers through the ashes.

"There has been a fire here within a few hours," he announced.

"And the trail has gone to pieces," added Stacy Brown who had got down from his pony and begun nosing about.

"The bandits have taken different directions from here, haven't they?" questioned the sheriff, glancing up.

"Yes. I'll tell you what let's do. Let's shut our eyes and let the ponies decide which trail to take," suggested Chunky gravely. "My Bismarck can follow the trail of a squirrel."

"This is not a squirrel trail," answered Ford briefly. "There are five of us men here. Four will take separate trails while one remains here. Let each man follow his trail for, say, three hours, then, whether or not he has discovered anything, he will return to this point. We can then decide upon further action."

"I have an idea that the bandits discovered that they were being followed," suggested one of the two passengers. "Otherwise, why should they split up and take different trails?"

"Yes. I agree with you," nodded the sheriff. Mr. Ford decided that one of the passenger volunteers should remain behind, then assigned the other passenger and Tom, Stacy and himself to follow the bandits' trails, Ford selecting what seemed to be the most promising trail for himself.

Full understanding of what each one was to do was had, then the four rode away, leaving their guard where he could see, yet remain hidden.

The four trails led on for five miles without a break. Stacy, full of importance because of the duty assigned to him, was watching his trail closely, and, had he been less observant, he might have missed the point where the trail again split. Discovering this, he halted and sat regarding the two trails with solemn eyes.

"Sharp trick," he nodded. "It doesn't fool Stacy Brown, though." He decided that the left-hand trail swung over towards the one that Tom Gray was riding,

perhaps joining it a short distance from the junction where Stacy was at that moment. Having come to this conclusion, the fat boy had a bright idea. He would take a short cut across country. He knew that this was a risky thing to do, but he had several mountain peaks for landmarks and did not believe that he could go astray, so he started full of confidence, leaving both trails behind him.

An hour-and-a-half passed. Stacy still had thirty minutes to ride before it would be time for him to turn back towards the starting point, as he learned by consulting his watch, and he decided to make the most of those thirty minutes.

“There! Didn’t I tell you?” he cried as he rode out into an open space and instantly discovered the hoof-prints of several horses on the soft ground. “I was positive that I couldn’t be wrong. My time is up, but I have found the spot where the rascals got together. Now I’ll just turn about and follow it home. This is the trail we must follow to find Uncle Hip. Yes, I’ll go back and report.”

Stacy Brown’s intentions were good, and, well satisfied with what he had accomplished, he rode along humming softly to himself, now and then confiding his opinions to his pony. The little animal wiggled its ears as if it understood.

“Hulloa! There goes the sun. Seven o’clock! Who would have thought it? According to my watch I’ve been back at the forks for a quarter of an hour. I wonder if I really have?” Stacy regarded his surroundings narrowly. “No. I never saw any of you mountain-peak fellows before. I must have made a mistake in my reckonings, but I’ve got a biscuit in my pocket, and we’ll be able to go quite a distance on one biscuit, especially on this kind of a biscuit. Some biscuits go a great deal farther than others. This is one of the farther kind,” finished Chunky, performing a series of contortions as he tried to break off a piece of biscuit with his teeth.

The pony was laboring up a steep incline, the stirrup straps creaking in rhythm with the animal’s quick, short steps, Stacy’s body, from the belt up, bobbing upwards and backwards with monotonous regularity. The reins lay over the saddle pommel, thus giving the pony’s head full play and enabling it to snatch a mouthful of greens here and there.

Suddenly the little animal threw its head up and snorted. Stacy Brown ceased munching and sat staring wide-eyed.

“Suffering cats! You’re IT, Stacy Brown!” he gasped.

Jerking his rifle from the saddle-boot he fired three quick shots over the head of his pony.

CHAPTER VI

CHUNKY MEETS THE BANDITS

The pony had nosed its way around the base of a high rock, fetching up on a meadow, when Stacy made the discovery that startled him. What he saw was a group of men sitting about a cook-fire, hurriedly eating a meal while their ponies grazed on the mountain grass some distance from the fire.

The boy knew instantly that he had stumbled upon the bandits. He realized, too, in those brief seconds, that he must be a long way from the place where he was to meet his companions.

The desperadoes saw the intruder about the time that Chunky saw them. Used to emergencies and quick action, the men sprang for their rifles, which were standing against a boulder near at hand. Chunky also saw that Lieutenant Wingate was not with them. Had the boy thought twice he would have held his fire, but, as it turned out, his shots served a good purpose. It startled the bandits, causing momentary confusion, which gave Stacy an opportunity to head in an opposite direction, which he was not slow in doing.

“Ye-o-o-o-ow!” howled the fat boy in a shrill, piercing voice. The shots and the yells startled the bandits’ ponies as it had their owners. The horses threw up their heads, snorted and galloped into the mountain meadow, fully twenty rods from the camp, while the boy threw himself on the neck of his pony, fully expecting a shot or a volley from them, and dashed around the base of a high rock at a perilous pace. He had no more than reached the protection of the rock than the *pock, pock* of rifle bullets, as they hit the rock to his rear, reached his ears.

“Oh, wow!” howled Chunky. “I lost my biscuit.” In ordinary circumstances he would have gone back to look for the biscuit, but just now Stacy was in somewhat of a hurry. Fortunately for the boy, it took the bandits fully twenty minutes to round up their horses, by which time the fat boy was far in the lead, riding like mad. He had lost all sense of direction, but perhaps the pony had not. The little animal had taken affairs into its own control and was laying out its own

trail.

The bandits, instead of following, rode with all speed farther into the mountains, but Chunky continued on at his same perilous pace, even though darkness had now overtaken him.

“Whoa, Bismarck!” commanded Chunky finally, reining in his pony. “Do you know where you’re going, or don’t you?”

The pony rattled the bit between its teeth, tossed its head up and down, and uttered a loud whinny.

“You said ‘yes,’ didn’t you? All right, if you know where you are, go along. You surely can’t know any less about it than I do.”

Rider and mount resumed their journey at a somewhat slower pace, and rode on until Stacy was brought to a sudden stop by a sharp, gruff word of command.

“Halt!” ordered a voice just ahead of him. The pony gave a startled jump that nearly unhorsed its rider.

“Oh, wow!” howled Chunky, and on the impulse of the moment he fired two quick shots at the sound.

“Stop it! It’s Tom Gray. Haven’t you any more sense than to blaze away before you know at what you are shooting?”

“Oh, fiddlesticks! Had you been through what I have you would shoot at the drop of the hat. Are you lost, too?”

“Lost? I am not lost. Don’t you know where you are?”

“No. I might be in the suburbs of Chillicothe for all I know.”

“The camp is only a few rods away,” Tom Gray informed him.

“You don’t say?” wondered Chunky.

“We heard you coming, and thought it might be Mr. Ford. How did you happen to come in over that trail?”

“Ask Bismarck. He knows all about it. I don’t. Got any news about Uncle Hip?”

“No. Of course you saw nothing of either him or the bandits.”

“I not only found the robbers, but I had a battle with them,” answered Stacy.

“What’s that? Don’t trifle, Brown. This is a serious matter,” rebuked Tom.

“I’m telling you the truth. It was this way. I was riding along, peaceful like, when, all of a sudden, biff, boom, bang! It seemed to me that fifty or a hundred men burst from the bushes.”

“So many as that?” laughed Tom.

“Well, something like that. I may be a dozen or so out of the way, but you see I didn’t stop to count them. I raised my trusty rifle and—well, to make a long story short, I fired right into that howling bunch of bandits. I suppose I emptied as many as twelve saddles.”

“Wait a moment,” urged one of the travelers who had joined them. “How many times did you reload?”

“Not at all. I didn’t have time.”

“Captain Gray, he emptied twelve saddles, so he must have shot two men with each bullet, as his magazine holds only six cartridges. I call that some shooting.”

“Is that so? Then I must have done as you say. Wonderful, wasn’t it?”

At this juncture, Sheriff Ford rode into camp and was quickly told of what Stacy had discovered. Mr. Ford, after a few quick questions, realized that the boy really had stumbled on the right trail and discovered the bandits.

“You did well, young man,” he complimented. “I thought I had struck a lead, but the trail pinched out. Can you take us to the place where you came on those ruffians?”

“No, but the pony can, or you can follow my trail. I reckon I left a pretty plain one. I know Uncle Hip better than you do, and if he has been able to get away from the fellows who captured him I’ll guarantee that he will find us. He would know we wouldn’t go away and leave him. For that reason I suggest that we build a fire to attract Uncle Hip’s attention, should he be in this vicinity.”

One of the men protested, saying it would be dangerous, but the sheriff agreed with Stacy.

“We will have a fire and will post guards to protect ourselves,” he said. “We shall not be bothered by the bandits to-night; I am positive of that. They know that the alarm has been given and that, in all probability, a posse is already on their trail. If nothing develops during the night—if we get no news from Lieutenant Wingate—we will start for Gardner in the morning and organize a big searching party to comb the mountains for him.”

After all phases of the situation had been discussed, the sheriff’s plan was agreed to, and a fire was built up. It had been blazing for some time when, in a lull in the conversation, Stacy was reminded that he had not finished telling about his meeting with the bandits.

“Yes. You left off with shooting two men with each bullet,” laughed Tom Gray.

“In the excitement of meeting up with the villains,” resumed Stacy, without an instant’s hesitation, “I wheeled the pony—spun him about on his hind feet like a top, set him down on all fours and dashed away. We didn’t gallop, we simply dashed. You know it wasn’t that I was afraid. Anyone who knows me knows that nothing can scare me. I—”

“*Bang, bang, bang!*”

“Oh, wow!” howled the fat boy, diving head first into a clump of bushes where he crouched wide-eyed, the chill creepers chasing up and down his spinal

column. The others of the party sprang up and snatched their rifles, Ford kicking the blazing wood of the camp-fire aside, and Tom Gray dousing it with a pail of water.

“Lie low, everybody, till I find out what this means!” commanded the sheriff sharply.

“Are—are we attacked? Have the scoundrels come back?” chattered Chunky.

“Be quiet!” Mr. Ford crept out into the darkness, the others waiting in tense expectancy listening for a rifle volley.

Tom thought the shots they had heard were signals, but no one else believed such to be the case.

The flash of a revolver, a sharp report close at hand, was followed by a shout from Stacy Brown and two shots from his own weapon at a shadowy moving figure skulking behind a clump of bushes.

CHAPTER VII

BANDITS CATCH A TARTAR

The blow on the head had left Lieutenant Wingate unconscious. Without loss of a minute he was thrown over the back of the horse, in front of the rider, like a sack of meal on its way home from the mill, then the horse started away at a trot.

After a few moments of violent jolting, consciousness began to return to Hippy and he groped for something to take hold of to relieve the strain of his trying position. His fingers finally gripped the boot of his captor.

Quick as a flash, the bandit brought down the butt of his revolver on the captive's head, whereupon Hippy went to sleep again, the blood trickling from nose and mouth. Other riders, in the meantime, had caught up with and passed the rider who was carrying him away. From what was said it was apparent that Hippy's captor was the leader of the party, for the others deferred to his commands, and, riding on ahead, soon disappeared. The trail grew more and more rugged. On the right a solid granite wall rose sheer for several hundred feet, while on the left, the side over which Hippy's head was hanging, the ground dropped away sharply for fully three hundred feet.

Lieutenant Wingate again began to recover consciousness. It seemed to him as if all the blood in his body were concentrated in his aching head and neck. He did not realize at the moment how the arms and hands were smarting from being dragged through bushes and against the rough edges of rocks, but he did discover that two large lumps had been raised on his head, one well down towards the base of the brain. Had the second blow been an inch farther down, it probably would have killed him.

His head becoming clearer, Hippy began to consider his situation—to think what he could do to extricate himself from his uncomfortable and perilous position. His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by an exclamation from the bandit and a sharp pressure of a spur against the pony's side. Hippy could feel the rider's leg contract as the spur was driven home. The pony reared and threatened to buck, but, evidently changing its mind, started away at a jolting

trot.

The interruption had served one good purpose: it had given Hippy an opportunity to get one hand up to his shirt, where the hand fumbled for a few perilous seconds, then dropped cautiously to its former position. That hand now held a pin. Miserable as he was, Hippy smiled grimly and pricked the pony's side with the pin.

The bandit roared as the animal jumped, and again applied the spur, followed instantly by a jab of Hippy's new weapon, the pin. A lively few seconds ensued, and the pony bucked so effectively that its rider had all he could do to stick to the saddle, and at the same time manage his captive and the reins. Hippy jabbed the pin in again and again, though every buck of the animal nearly broke the Overlander in two.

A few seconds of this treatment and the end came suddenly. With a final humping of its back in a buck that lifted all four feet from the ground, the pony went up into the air with arching back and with head held stiffly close to its forefeet. The bandit threw all the strength of one hand into an effort to jerk that stubborn head back where it belonged, while the other hand grabbed desperately for the body of the captive, which was slowly slipping away. The bandit, as a result, came a cropper over the pony's head. Hippy wriggled and slipped off, shooting head first down the sharp incline of smooth rocks that fell away from the left side of the trail. The pony galloped away a few rods; then, halting, gazed about him uneasily.

The bandit, after a few dazed seconds, got up and started for his mount, then halting suddenly began searching for his captive. Hippy Wingate was nowhere in sight, though his captor found where his body had crushed down the bushes as it slipped from the trail. The bandit finally gave it up, and, catching his pony, quickly rode away.

"No use. He's done for," growled the man before leaving the scene. "He's gone clear to the bottom, mashed flat as a flapjack."

The hoof-beats of the pony had no sooner died away than Hippy Wingate's head was cautiously raised from behind the roots of a tree that clung to the side of the mountain, gripped into a deep crevice for anchorage.

"I'm not a flapjack just yet, old top," he muttered. "I may be if I am not careful how I move about. I suppose I ought to hang on here till daylight, but those fellows may come back. They can't afford to let me get away. I know too much."

“No Use. He’s Done For!”

Hippy began crawling cautiously toward the trail, and finally gaining it, sat down to think over what he had better do next. He felt for his revolver and was relieved to find that it had not been taken from him, and thus fortified, he decided that the prudent course would be to find a hiding place and wait there for daylight, so he started away, taking the back track, which he followed until it had so widened that he was unable to keep to the trail. He then branched off to the right, holding as straight a course as possible. The trickle of water caught his ear, and, a moment later, Hippy was flat on his stomach, drinking long, deep draughts from a tiny mountain stream. He then bathed his face and head and his smarting, swollen arms. He knew that he ought to be moving, but what direction to take was the question. Being a good woodsman, he knew that to wander aimlessly about in the night surely would result in losing himself completely.

After searching about for some time, Lieutenant Wingate found a high rock suited to his purpose. He climbed up and sat down.

“The scoundrels will have to move quickly if they get me this time,” he muttered. “They’ll—” Hippy’s head drooped, and he sank slowly to the rock fast asleep.

When he again opened his eyes the sun was shining down into them, and his cheeks felt as if they were on fire.

“Morning! Who would think it?” he exclaimed.

Without wasting time, he made his way back to the stream where he drank and bathed. Now came the question as to the course he should follow.

“It is probable that some of my outfit will remain by the railroad where the hold-up occurred,” he reflected. “That’s where I am going.”

After a final look at the sun, Hippy started back briskly. He did not follow the trail, believing that he could find a more direct course, and that such a course eventually would lead him to the railroad a short distance to the west of where he had been the previous evening.

It was nearly noon when Hippy first began to realize that he was hungry. He had not thought of breakfast, nor would it have done him any good had he thought of it. An hour later he found a berry bush and ate all the fruit it held. That helped a little and he again plodded on. About four o’clock that afternoon he reached the railroad, and, not long after that, he was trotting around the bend to the scene of the hold-up. The place was deserted. Hippy fired a signal from his revolver and listened. There was no reply. A rabbit hopped across the tracks.

He fired twice at it, missing each time.

"There goes my supper!" he exclaimed ruefully. "Next time I sight game I'll throw a stone at it. I reckon I can throw stones better than I can shoot. I should have thought my friends would wait for me."

Hippy did discover where the Overland ponies had been unloaded, then he understood that his companions had gone in search of him. This knowledge heartened him up a great deal, and he immediately set himself to work to discover which way the party had gone. What he was looking for was the trail of his own pony, whose shoeprints he believed he would be able to identify instantly. Hippy picked up the trail in a remarkably short time.

"Here I go. I've got to travel some if I am to catch them before dark," he cried, starting away.

Darkness found Lieutenant Wingate wandering aimlessly near the place where the trail forked and where his companions were now discussing their further plans for the morrow. He concluded that he would have to spend another night in the open and alone, and had just ensconced himself on the highest ledge he could find when he caught sight of the light from Sheriff Ford's camp-fire. Hippy gazed at it for some moments, then raised his revolver and fired three shots.

The camp-fire was suddenly blotted out.

"There! I've shot out the fire," he grumbled. "Just the same, I don't believe it is the bandit camp, and I'm going down."

Moving with extreme caution, Hippy crept down the mountain-side until he believed that he was near the place where he had seen the fire.

"I reckon there's nothing doing, boys," Ford was saying. "Light the fire, but keep a sharp lookout."

Hippy got up. Stacy's keen eyes discovered him and the fat boy fired.

"Hi, there! Cut the firing! It's Hippy," called Lieutenant Wingate, ducking.

"Oh, wow!" howled Chunky.

A shout went up from the searching party when Hippy called out his warning, and he was fairly dragged into camp where Sheriff Ford hurriedly started a cook-fire and put over coffee as a starter. While this was being done, Lieutenant Wingate briefly related the story of his capture and escape.

"You say you know the man who was on foot when you were taken?" asked Tom Gray.

"Yes, I know him."

"Give me one guess and see if I can name him," spoke up Sheriff Ford, straightening up, frying-pan in hand.

"It's yours. Who is he?" laughed Lieutenant Wingate.

"Our story-telling friend of the Red Limited, William Sylvester Holmes,"

replied Ford confidently.

“You win,” chuckled Hippy. “How did you guess it?”

“I was suspicious of him all the time. At Summit my suspicions were, in a way, confirmed. He sent telegrams from there that, I now believe, informed the gang about the treasure car.”

“Was there really a treasure car on the train, Ford?” asked Tom.

“You might call it that. There was nearly three million dollars in gold on that car. Pretty good haul, eh? I reckon the authorities of this county will be glad to hear what you have to tell them. I will go to Gardner with you and we’ll have a confab with the sheriff there, if you will spare the time.”

“Sure we will,” spoke up Stacy. “We riders have to keep busy, you know.”

“It strikes me that you have been rather busy since I first met you,” returned the sheriff.

“What are your wishes, to go through to-night or wait until morning and get an early start?” he asked the two passengers.

“I’ll flag a train for myself down by the bend and you men can ride through. You can’t miss the way. There is a good trail all the way from here to Gardner, and you should be there by early afternoon.”

The two passengers said that, if the sheriff would flag the train for them, they would prefer to go by train too, as they were in haste to reach their destination on the coast, important business awaiting them there.

“All right. I’ll flag the next train after we get to the rails and put you two men aboard. I can then ride through with these three Overland men. I’d prefer a hoss to a Pullman any time.”

The party made themselves as comfortable as they could, sleeping on the ground, and before daylight next morning Mr. Ford had breakfast ready. Hippy was stiff and his hat hurt his head, but he made light of his discomfiture and was ready for the start which was made before sunup. Ford made good his word to stop the next train, which proved to be a local, and there was not so much grumbling by the train crew as there would have been had the train been a limited one.

The horseback ride that day was a hard one, but all were used to the saddle, and Sheriff Ford, himself a “rough-rider,” was interested in the riding of the three Overlanders. By this time he had grown to understand Stacy Brown better, and his laughter at the boy’s sallies was loud and appreciative. Late in the afternoon the delayed party rode into Gardner where a warm welcome awaited them from the Overland girls, who had already arranged for a posse to go out to look for the missing ones.

The authorities were keenly interested in the information that Sheriff Ford and

the three Overland men had to offer, and declared their intention of starting out in an effort to round up the gang. That evening there was a genuine reunion of the Overlanders at which their further plans were discussed. It was left to Hippy to find a guide, while Stacy was to select the pack animals, and the girls the food and other equipment for the journey. The results of their quests were destined to furnish much amusement on the following day.

CHAPTER VIII

HEADED FOR THE HIGH COUNTRY

"I have found a guide," announced Hippy next morning, walking into the post office where he found all the other members of his party writing postal cards to friends in the east.

"That's good. Where is he?" asked Tom Gray.

"If you will look up you will see him."

The Overlanders looked. Just to the rear of Hippy Wingate stood a grinning Chinaman, both hands hidden in the ends of his flowing sleeves. The Oriental was bowing and scraping, his queue animatedly bobbing up and down. Stacy uttered a loud "Ha, ha!"

"Permit me to introduce to you the Honorable Woo Smith whom I have selected, subject to your approval, to accompany us on our journey to the High Sierras," announced Hippy Wingate.

"But surely, Hippy, this man cannot be a guide," protested Elfreda Briggs. "We need a guide!"

"Perhaps he isn't, but you can't find anything else with a magnifying glass in this burg. Should you folks think best not to accept him, we'll go it alone. I've done the best I can. Remember, too, that I'm a sick man, that I've been mauled and keelhailed by a bunch of bandits and—"

"Do you speak English?" interrupted Grace Harlowe.

"Les. Me speak English velly fine."

"You say his name is Woo Smith?" questioned Emma.

"The Honorable Woo Smith," Hippy informed her.

"What has he done in the way of mountain work?" persisted Grace.

"I am informed that he has made frequent journeys to the mountains with prospecting parties and hunters as cook, guide and general handy man. At one time he was out with a government survey party."

"As cook or guide?" interjected Nora Wingate.

"The former, I believe."

"This outfit needs a good cook," suggested Chunky.

"Woo, do you know horses?" asked Tom Gray.

"Les."

"That reminds me, Chunky, what have you done about the pack animals?" demanded Lieutenant Wingate.

"Got three dandies. I have learned that we must travel light. They say that the trails are very rough in the High Country, and further, that we must depend upon the country for our food, generally speaking. I don't know what Uncle Hip and I are going to do if it comes to short rations. Of course, as a last resort we can eat the pack-horses. They eat horses in France, so why shouldn't we do the same, if we're hungry enough."

"That reminds me. One of the men out with us on our search for Hippy declared that our ponies would not be suitable for this journey, and that it requires animals accustomed to the peculiarities of the Sierras," averred Tom Gray.

"Oh, pooh!" grunted the fat boy. "My pony could climb a tree."

"How much money do you wish, Woo?" questioned Tom.

"Five dollah a week."

"What do you say, good people?" asked Grace.

"I don't care what you do," exclaimed Hippy. "I want food and I want someone who knows how to cook it fit for human consumption, that's all."

"I second the motion," agreed Stacy. "We can't all live on soul-transmigration stuff. I'd get mental indigestion on that food in thirty seconds by the watch."

"We had a Chinaman on our journey across the Great American Desert, and he was an excellent man," declared Elfreda Briggs. "I move that we take this one."

The others agreed with her, and Grace, turning to Woo, told him that he was engaged.

"What has been done about the general equipment?" asked Tom.

Grace said that experienced men had advised against the Overlanders burdening themselves with tents or any heavy equipment.

"We have slept in the open many times before, so I think we shall be able to get along very nicely," she added.

Stacy Brown protested vigorously. He declared that he would not sleep out of doors where bugs and other undesirable things could get at him, but, after discussing the matter further, every one agreed that the tents would prove an unnecessary encumbrance. They went over their list critically, eliminating several articles that they thought they could do without.

"I have an idea!" exclaimed Stacy.

“Keep it,” urged Emma. “They seem to be reasonably scarce with you.”

“At least I don’t transmigrate them,” retorted Chunky. “As I was about to remark when interrupted, I have an idea that this outfit will have to browse with the horses if it wishes food.”

“It would be a great flesh-reducer,” murmured Emma, giving Chunky a sidelong glance.

Elfreda suggested that they have a look at the pack-horses selected by Stacy, so they all walked over to the corral, and expressed themselves as well satisfied with Stacy’s selections. One white, mischievous little animal, with a circle of delicate pink about each eye, they named Kitty. The name seemed to fit her. The other two animals they decided to name later on after learning their peculiarities.

“I’ve ordered pack saddles for them,” announced Hippy, “and a pair of kyacks for each horse.”

“What is a kyack? Something good to eat?” questioned Stacy.

“A kyack is an alforgas,” Emma Dean informed him. “I am amazed at your ignorance.”

“I agree with you, Emma. For once I do,” nodded Hippy. “For your information, Stacy, a kyack is a packing outfit. These are made either of heavy canvas or of rawhide, shaped square and dried over boxes. After drying, the boxes are removed, leaving the stiff rawhide or canvas, like small trunks, open at the top. They are in reality sacks—”

“Me savvy klyack,” chuckled the Chinaman, rubbing his palms together gleefully.

“Mr. Smith knows,” nodded Hippy.

“The explanation is not satisfactory. Once more I rise to ask if this kyack thing is some sort of dried beef that we are expected to eat when real food is scarce?” insisted Chunky.

“You and I, lad, would have to be pretty hungry to eat a kyack,” laughed Hippy. “The loops of the kyack are slung on each side of the horse. They are used to pack belongings over the mountains. I have also ordered sawbuck trees for the pack-saddles, together with pack-cinch, and pack-rope for each animal. I also took the liberty of buying blankets from which to make saddle-pads. It will be cheaper than trying to get along with horses with sore backs, I think. Then there are hobbles for the horses, a couple of cow bells—”

“Are we going to take cows along with us?” wondered Chunky, opening his eyes a little wider.

“Not quite. Only a calf or two,” murmured Emma Dean.

“The bells are for the horses, so that they may be easily found in the morning,” spoke up Tom Gray. “I thought you had been out before.”

“I have, but never with such an outfit as this, especially the transmigration end of it,” retorted Stacy, giving Emma a quick look to see if his shot had gone home. “I see,” he added. “But every time I hear the bells a-ringing, I shall think of home and a pitcherful of warm milk.”

“Perfectly proper food for the species to which I so recently referred,” observed Emma airily. “However, from all accounts, you will have nothing more nourishing than snow-water from the tall peaks of the Sierras.”

“Br-r-r-r!” shivered Stacy.

At Hippy’s direction, the Honorable Woo Smith led the pack-horses over to the general store, and there, with Stacy to assist him, Hippy began packing their equipment, throwing a diamond hitch about each pack. The girls, observing the work, discovered that Stacy Brown was quite as familiar with “throwing packs” as was his Uncle Hippy.

“Mister Brown is not quite the fool he would have us believe,” declared Elfreda Briggs. “It is my opinion that he believes in putting his worst foot forward, keeping the other one hidden behind it.”

A group of mountaineers were standing near, observing the operations with interest. One stepped up and examined the much-worn saddle on Hippy Wingate’s pony.

“Son,” said he, “do ye reckon on climbin’ mountains with that thing?”

“Why not?” demanded Hippy.

“I reckon it might be all right for the Rockies, but yer saddle’ll be on the critter’s tail afore ye git half way to the top of the Big Sierras.”

Hippy stroked his chin reflectively.

“You mean I ought to have a double-cinch on the riding saddles? Is that it?”

“I reckon.”

“Thanks, Buddy. I’ll fix it. I should have thought of that, but I am not at all familiar with the lay of the land up here.”

“Ye will be, pardner, after ye’ve fell off it a few thousand times. The landscape in these here parts be rather sudden in spots,” drawled the mountaineer.

A yell from the Honorable Woo Smith interrupted the dialogue. Kitty, the mischievous pack-horse, had playfully seized the queue of Woo Smith between her teeth and was jerking her head up and down, and, with each jerk, the Chinaman was jolted backwards, howling lustily, chattering in volleys in his native tongue. The street, near the village store, filled with cowboys and citizens as if by magic. They set up yells, shouts and cat-cries that smothered the chatter of the new guide.

Grace, being nearest to the mischievous animal, sprang forward and gave the

white pack-horse a smart slap with the flat of her hand on Kitty's plump stomach. The mare instantly dropped the howling Chinaman, and, whirling on Grace with wide open mouth, looked as if she were about to devour the Overland Rider. The girl never flinched.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Kitty?" she chided. "If ever I see you do a thing like that again I'll surely have you punished. Do you understand?"

The mare's mouth closed slowly, her upper lip quivered, she nibbled gingerly at Grace Harlowe's sleeve, and looked as meek as was possible for a mischievous pony to look. The cowboys grunted disgustedly. They were disgruntled that Grace had spoiled their fun, disappointed that the white mare had not taken a large slice, either out of the Chinaman or Grace Harlowe herself.

"Grace, do you know, you have given us a most remarkable demonstration of the transmigration of thought," declared Emma. "It was your thought, transmitted to the mentality of the white mare, that caused her to desist, to beg of you to forgive and—"

"Yeo-o-o-o-ow!" howled Chunky.

"Young man, your rudeness is inexcusable," rebuked Emma.

"That's what the white mare wanted to say to Grace," retorted Stacy.

While all this was taking place, Tom and Elfreda were talking with the mountaineers, getting all the information they could about trails and conditions in the mountains. The result of the information gleaned was that the Overland Riders decided that they would take the "Cold Stream Trail" for the High Country, a section seldom visited, but which Woo Smith declared he knew all about. The spectators were inclined to make sport of the explorers, and especially of the idea that women could ride the Sierras. Even the postmaster sought to dissuade them from making the attempt.

"It's a bad country," he confided to Tom. "With that bunch of gals on your hands, you'll starve to death, sure's you're a foot high."

"There is plenty of game there, is there not?" questioned Tom.

"Yes, for them that knows how to shoot."

"Then I reckon we will not starve. What other objection is there?"

"The Jones Boys. You watch out right smart for them."

"Who are they?" demanded Elfreda, who had been an interested listener to the conversation between Tom and the postmaster.

The postmaster glanced about him apprehensively before replying, then, leaning towards Tom, spoke in a half-whisper.

"Outlaws!" he said. "I reckon you've heard of them. It is suspected that they're the fellows that held up the Red Limited the other night. I reckon you know something about that affair." The postmaster squinted knowingly at Tom,

who nodded.

“So, that’s it, eh?”

“Yes. Better look out for them. They have their hang-out somewhere in the mountains, but nobody has ever been able to trail them to it, and I don’t reckon no one ever will—and come back to tell about it. A squad of Pinkerton detectives went into the mountains looking for those fellows, but not one of that bunch of detectives has ever been heard from since.”

“It sounds shivery, doesn’t it?” spoke up Elfreda. “However, we have no especial reason to fear the bandits because there could be no object in their interfering with us. We do not carry money with us—not enough to make it worth their while to try to rob us—nor are we looking for trouble.”

“No object!” exploded the postmaster. “Lady, those fellows would kill you for two bits and a piece of string.”

In his own mind, Tom Gray was not so positive that the bandits had no reason for interfering with them. On the contrary, if the Jones Boys knew that it was the Overland Riders who had assisted in driving them from the scene of the attempted train robbery, the Overlanders might confidently look for some stirring times in the High Sierras.

CHAPTER IX

THEIR SLUMBERS DISTURBED

“All aboard for the High Sierras!” called Stacy Brown, swinging to his saddle a few minutes later. The others, one by one, mounted and sat awaiting the order to start.

Woo Smith had gone on ahead. Scorning the use of a pony to ride, he had trotted on, shooing the pack-horses along, the departure of the Overlanders having been deferred until about an hour after he had left them. Woo said that he would make camp at a good place and have supper ready upon their arrival.

The Overlanders finally started away, waving their hands to the curious natives, and soon reached the trail that led towards the High Country. The trail was an old one, but so seldom used that it could hardly be dignified by the name of trail. Woo plainly was familiar with it, for he had reached it by the most direct course, marking the beginning of it by breaking over branches of bushes, a trick that he had learned from white men with whom he had explored the mountains at some previous time.

Very good time was made that day, and when about eighteen miles from Gardner they saw the smoke of Woo’s camp-fire. Half an hour later they reached it and found that the guide had selected an ideal camping place. There was water and good feed for the horses. Woo already had turned out the pack-horses, which were grazing out of sight of the camp, and the cowbells on two of them could be heard tinkling in the distance.

“I reckon I drew a prize,” declared Hippy pompously, referring to Woo.

“Time will tell,” answered Emma Dean.

“I agree with you,” answered Elfreda Briggs. “One shouldn’t jump at conclusions, as Grace Harlowe says.”

Saddles were quickly removed, and, before doing anything else, the men of the party washed the backs of the ponies to prevent the animals becoming saddle-sore. By the time they had finished and turned out the ponies to browse, the guide had supper ready for them. The air was hot and motionless, for they

were not yet high enough in the mountains to catch the cool breezes from the snow-clad tops, and all felt the heat.

The Chinaman had prepared a supper that won golden words of praise from the girls of the Overland party, and Stacy and Hippy ate until it seemed as if they must pop open. The flapjacks fairly melted in the mouths of the Riders and the coffee they pronounced to be delicious.

“Won’t it be fine not to have to do any cooking on this trip?” smiled Emma.

“Yes. I feel as if a great load had been lifted from my shoulders,” agreed Stacy. “I did most of the cooking for our Pony Rider outfit. Ordinarily I would rather cook than do most anything that I know of.”

“I am sincerely glad that you are not cooking for this party,” declared Emma Dean with emphasis.

“You are congratulating yourselves too early,” interjected Nora Wingate. “We are all going to do work just as we always have done.”

Grace and Elfreda agreed with her.

“You don’t mean that we’ve got to get up in the dewy morning and rustle grub for the outfit, do you?” demanded Chunky.

“Yes, of course,” answered Grace.

“That is the fun of camping,” said Miss Briggs. “We should soon forget all we knew had we servants to do the work for us. He is an industrious fellow, though, I must say,” added Elfreda, glancing at Woo, who was busily at work washing dishes and singing “Hi-lee, hi-lo!”

“He is a song-bird, too,” observed Stacy.

“Woo, you must be saving of the provisions,” called Grace. “Remember we must make our supplies go a long way, for we shall not get any more for some time.”

“Don’t worry till to-morrow. Hi-lee, hi-lo; hi-lee, hi-lo!” sang the guide.

“What’s that he says?” demanded Tom Gray.

“He says, ‘Don’t worry until to-morrow,’” interpreted Emma.

“Ha, ha!” laughed Chunky, and the Overland Riders joined in the laughter.

“You savvy plenty to-morrow. Me savvy glub to-morrow,” added Woo, chuckling to himself.

“He speaks hog Latin quite fluently, doesn’t he?” observed Stacy solemnly.

“You leave it to Smith. I found Smith, you know,” reminded Hippy Wingate pridefully.

“Hi-lee, hi-lo!” sang the Chinaman, continuing with his work, while the Overlanders, having finished their supper, gathered about the campfire, and forgot the heat of the California night in its cheerful glow. It seemed good to them to be out in the open once more, to be where they were obliged to depend

almost wholly on their own resourcefulness for their food and lodging, if not for their lives, for they were going into perilous places, places fraught with dangers.

Woo, having completed his work, and having hung his frying-pans and other equipment to nails driven in a tree, sat down on his haunches by the fire, and, after composing himself, lost his long yellow fingers in the mysterious depths of his wide-flowing sleeves.

"Me savvy plenty fine night," he observed, gazing blissfully up into the sky. "You savvy plenty fine night, too?" he asked, looking soulfully at Miss Briggs.

"I savvy the same as you do, Woo," replied Elfreda soberly. "It is going to be a fine night for sleep, but I think the air will be cooler later on."

Woo nodded wisely, and Stacy glanced up with quickened interest.

"Are we going to sleep on the ground?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Tom Gray. "You ought to be used to that."

"Are there snakes up here?" questioned the fat boy apprehensively.

"Me savvy plenty snake," the guide informed them.

"What kind?" wondered Emma.

"Lattlers."

"He means rattlers," interpreted Grace Harlowe.

"Oh, wow!" muttered the fat boy. "I think I'll climb a tree."

"You will take pot luck on the ground with the rest of us," answered Tom rather severely.

"Me savvy lattler in blanket once," declared the guide. "Lattler sleep plenty in blanket. Go away in molning. Lattler no hurt Chinaman," explained Woo.

Signs of uneasiness were observable among the girls of the Overland party, and in Stacy Brown as well. Tom declared that Woo was "drawing the long bow," and said that he never had heard anything of the sort about the Sierra trails.

"I have," announced Hippy. "There are snakes all about here, but we are not going to lose any sleep over it. Besides, Stacy is getting the wiggles."

"Yes. For goodness sake, drop the subject. You folks give me the willyjiggs," shivered Emma Dean.

"I'm not getting the wiggles," protested Stacy. "I reckon I'm not afraid of anything that walks."

"We were not speaking of that kind," reminded Nora. "We were speaking of reptiles."

"How long do you figure that it will take us to get into the High Country?" asked Grace by way of changing the subject.

"Me savvy eight days," answered Woo. "You savvy mebbly pony him no climb?"

“Yes, they can, too,” objected Stacy indignantly. “Our ponies can go where a bird can. Don’t you forget that.”

“Me savvy plenty snake, too,” added Woo.

“For goodness sake, stop that snake conversation,” cried Emma. “I shall surely dream about snakes if you go on that way.”

Smith grinned happily, then proceeded, with the utmost composure, to relate experiences with big rattlers in the Sierras. He told of waking up in the morning and finding one coiled in his blanket, under his arm, or, perhaps, nestled close to his neck for warmth from the chill night air of the higher altitudes, until Stacy was on the verge of a panic, and Emma Dean was shivering.

“Mr. Smith,” she said, after regarding him inquiringly for some moments. “Have you ever had any experience with transmigration of thought?” she asked.

“Tlans—tlans—”

“Transmigration,” assisted Hippy.

“Tlansmiglation! Les. Me savvy. Me savvy one time big hunter shoot one in mountains. Woo savvy bad medicine and run away,” chuckled the Chinaman.

“I reckon that will be about all for you this evening, Emma,” observed Hippy Wingate, amid peals of laughter from the Overland girls.

Tom got out the bedding, consisting of a blanket apiece, and a tarpaulin for a cover, while Woo busied himself with cutting browse which he placed on the ground and laid blankets on it. It was not a particularly soft bed at that. While they were preparing their beds, Stacy poked about with a stick, covering a radius of several rods.

“What in the world are you doing?” demanded Nora Wingate.

“He is beating up the landscape to drive out the serpents,” answered Emma. “You are a tenderfoot, aren’t you?”

“I don’t like the fleas to get next to my skin,” explained the fat boy lamely. “They tell me that these California fleas are awful.”

“Were I as tough as you, I do not believe I should worry about a little thing like that,” retorted Emma.

Stacy made no reply, but poked the fire savagely, then piled on more wood, occupying all the time he could before preparing for bed, and the others had turned in long before he was ready.

“Stop that fussing and come to bed!” ordered Hippy.

“Yes, for goodness sake, do,” added Miss Briggs. “Woo Smith, aren’t you ready to turn in?”

“Les. Me savvy glub first.”

“You might fetch Uncle Hip and myself a bite to eat while you are on the food question,” suggested Stacy.

“No food until breakfast,” admonished Grace.

After idling about and grumbling for fifteen minutes more, Stacy finally crawled in under the tarpaulin, uttering dismal groans and complaints about the hardness of his bed. All were lying with feet towards the fire. The smoke and the blaze drove away insects, and the warmth was pleasant, even though the night was sultry, and it was not long after that when the Overlanders dropped off to sleep.

Woo, chuckling to himself and muttering, crept cautiously to the men’s side of the fire, surveyed the layout, then crawled in under the tarpaulin beside Stacy Brown. A few moments later, Hippy, who lay next to Stacy, was aroused by the fat boy’s mutterings. Stacy was dreaming about snakes. Hippy knew because he heard his fat nephew say, “Snakes!”

“I’ll teach that boy a lesson and make him dream of something worth while,” decided Hippy. Rising on one elbow, Lieutenant Wingate glanced over the row of heads just visible above the top of the tarpaulin. He could barely make out their features in the faint light, but when his gaze finally came to rest on the face of the sleeping Chinaman, Hippy Wingate was suddenly possessed of a brilliant idea. Woo lay flat on his back, both hands snugly tucked into the wide-flowing sleeves.

“I have it,” chuckled Hippy.

Reaching over Chunky very cautiously, he lifted the long black queue of the guide, held it for a moment, then softly dropped it across the face of the sleeping, snoring Stacy. Chunky muttered and stirred restlessly. Hippy waited, then began slowly drawing the queue over Stacy’s face.

The fat boy awakened suddenly, but he did not move at once, for he was fairly paralyzed with terror. Something cold and soft was wriggling over his face. Uttering a mighty yell, Stacy grabbed that wriggling queue, at the same time giving it a tug.

It was now Woo Smith’s turn to yell, and yell he did, as he struggled and fought to free himself.

Stacy, hurling the thing from him, leaped to his feet, howling lustily. He stepped on Woo and went over backwards, landing on Hippy’s stomach, struggling and fighting, and finally finishing up by fastening his fingers in Tom Gray’s hair.

The camp was instantly in an uproar, and none was more loud in his protestations than Hippy Wingate himself.

CHAPTER X

“BOOTS AND SADDLES”

“Stop that noise!” shouted Tom Gray.

Emma uttered a frightened cry and springing up, started to run.

“Come back! We are all right,” commanded Miss Briggs.

“Oh, what is it? Hippy, my darlin’, are you all right?” wailed Nora.

“Snakes! Snakes! Oh, wow!” howled Stacy Brown.

All hands had turned out in a hurry, and Woo Smith was dancing about chattering and fondling his head at the base of his queue.

“Snakes! Where?” cried Emma.

“It crawled right over my face,” declared Stacy. “I grabbed it and hurled it from me, and think I must have flung it against a tree and killed it. Uncle Hip, go see if you can find it.”

“You poor fish!” chortled Hippy Wingate.

“You—you must be a good thrower, for there isn’t a tree near where you slept,” declared Emma.

“That’s so, there isn’t,” admitted Chunky. “Well, anyhow, it must have been a stone that I threw the snake against.”

“What you did do, young man, was to fall on me with your full weight,” rebuked Hippy. “Oh, why did I ever ask you to come with us?”

“That’s what I have been wondering,” agreed Emma.

“Please, please quiet down, good people,” begged Grace laughingly. “Suppose we find out what actually did occur. Does anyone know?”

“Yes. I know. A great big snake crawled over me,” averred Stacy.

“With all due respect to you, Stacy Brown, I don’t believe it,” differed Elfreda.

“He ate too much and had the nightmare,” suggested Miss Dean.

“It wasn’t a mare. I tell you it was a snake,” insisted Stacy. “I guess I know what I am talking about, and don’t you try to make me believe anything different. I won’t! I know what I believe, and I believe what I know, and that’s

the end of it.”

“Well, sir, what is the matter with you?” demanded Tom, facing the excited Chinaman.

“Mr. Smith has the willyjiggs, too,” answered Emma.

Woo chattered and caressed his head.

“Me savvy somebody pull queue. Me savvy head almost come off. Ouch!”

“Just a moment. Just a moment,” begged Grace. “You say someone pulled your queue?”

“Les.”

“This demands further investigation,” spoke up Hippy. “The question now before this tribunal is, who pulled the Chinaman’s queue. Emma Dean, did you pull Honorable Smith’s queue?”

“I did not,” retorted, Emma indignantly.

“All right, all right; don’t get all heated up about it. I take it that none of the other ladies tried to scalp our guide. How about you, Stacy?”

Stacy declared that he didn’t know anything about it, and cared less, and Tom Gray said the idea that he had done such a thing was preposterous.

“We will leave it to Smith,” announced Hippy. “Woo, did Mr. Brown try to pull your halter off?”

“Les, les. Me savvy him pull queue. Him neally pull head off. Woof!”

“I begin to understand. Ladies and gentlemen, the mystery is solved. The Honorable Woo Smith’s queue got on Stacy’s face and Stacy thought it was a snake. You see how easy it is to be carried away by one’s imagination. Stacy, if you raise further disturbance in this outfit I shall require you to roost by yourself. I, for one, at least, need my rest.”

“If Woo will get out I’ll keep quiet,” answered Stacy.

“Don’t wolly till to-morrow,” advised the Oriental, pawing about like an animal, in search of a suitable place on which to lie down and sleep.

No further disturbance occurred that night, though Stacy refused to turn in until he had seen Woo lie down at some distance from him, and at daybreak the Overlanders were aroused by the “Hi-lee, hi-lo!” of the guide, who was out gathering wood for the breakfast fire.

“Come, folks. Wash and get busy,” urged Hippy. “Who is the wrangler this morning?”

“It is Stacy’s turn, I believe,” replied Tom Gray.

“I don’t want to wrangle. I’m too sleepy and too cold,” protested the boy.

“That makes no difference. There is to be no shirking in this outfit,” answered Uncle Hippy.

The wrangler is the man who goes out in the morning to round up the horses.

Following the custom in the mountains, the Overlanders had turned out all but two of the ponies, permitting the stock to graze where it pleased through the night. The pack animals had been hobbled. It now became Stacy Brown's duty to find the animals, and drive the herd into camp.

"I don't hear the cow bells. The animals must have gotten away quite a distance," suggested Emma mischievously.

Stacy took all the time he could in getting ready, and, as a result, by the time he was ready to start, breakfast was nearly ready to be served.

"Don't I eat first?" he questioned anxiously.

"Certainly not. Wranglers always go out for the horses before breakfast," reminded Emma.

Chunky threw himself into the saddle and galloped away at a reckless pace, but his was a long chase, for the ponies had wandered some distance from camp. They were lying down in a glade and did not move or make a sound when the boy rode past them.

Stacy had followed their trail out, but, suddenly discovering that he had lost it, he turned about and went back to pick it up. This time he discovered the animals.

"So! There you are, eh?" he jeered, regarding the horses resentfully. "Thought you would play me a smart trick, did you? I'll be even with you for that."

After much floundering about, the white pack pony, Kitty, finally got up grunting and groaning dismally, then Stacy began removing the hobbles from their legs. Kitty gave him the most trouble, the white mare insisting on grabbing Chunky by the trousers every time he stooped to unfasten the hobbles. This continued until Stacy finally lost his patience, and, getting a switch, he gave Kitty a good sharp touching-up. Finally, having completed his task, he turned their heads towards camp and mounted his own saddle pony.

"Shoo! Go on, you lazy louts! Think I am going to eat cold grub, just out of consideration for you?"

It was shortly after that that the Overlanders in camp heard the tinkle of the bells on two of the pack animals, and when Stacy rode into camp the party was half way through breakfast. Slipping from his saddle, Stacy started at a run for breakfast, flinging a set of hobbles at the cook as he passed.

"Stacy! You are becoming a very violent young man," smiled Grace.

"Becoming?" spoke up Emma Dean. "It is my opinion that he always has been. No one could acquire his manners in so short a time."

"Association sometimes plays strange freaks with one," retorted Stacy. "Say, Uncle Hip. That white mare is a terror. She actually hid so that I should not see her; then, when I finally found her, she tried to eat me up. The brown one is the laziest thing I ever saw. We ought to call her the Idler, she's so lazy."

“Good!” cried Elfreda. “Idler she shall be, with the permission of our Captain, Grace Harlowe.”

“How about the other one?” asked Stacy.

“The black?” questioned Tom.

“Yes. He is always stumbling and getting into difficulties,” said Chunky.

“We will name him Calamity,” said Grace.

“That is what I was going to name the Chinaman,” grumbled the fat boy.

“The wrangler always attends to the packing, you know,” reminded Elfreda after they had finished breakfast.

“This wrangler doesn’t,” answered Chunky.

“Of course, in view of the fact that this is our first morning out, and that you are still a little green—” teased Miss Briggs.

“His natural color,” interjected Emma.

“I will help you,” finished Hippy. “By the way, you need not throw the diamond hitch around the packs this morning. Kitty has a soft pack, and the square hitch will answer very well, provided you make it good and tight.”

“Oh, I’ll make it tight, all right. I’ll lash it so tightly that the old horse won’t be able to breathe. I owe her a grudge, anyway,” declared Stacy. “Did you folks know that I learned a new hitch at Gardner?”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Emma.

“It is called ‘The Lone Packer,’” continued Stacy, unheeding the interruption. “It is even harder to learn to tie than is the diamond hitch. For a load of small articles it is supposed to be the best in use. The particular feature about it is that it pulls the pack away from the animal’s sides and prevents chafing.”

“Here, here! That isn’t the way to throw a square hitch,” objected Hippy, hurrying over to Stacy who was laboring with the white mare’s pack, Kitty standing with all four feet braced, groaning dismally. “What have you done to her?”

“I? Nothing. She thinks she’s smart.”

Hippy regarded the pack animal keenly, then, stepping up, he placed his hat on top of her pack. The mare flinched and groaned. It was a test that Hippy had seen practiced on lazy horses in France during the war.

“So that’s it, eh?” he chuckled. “She is soldiering, but never mind. We will take all that out of her.”

“That is what I told Kitty this morning. I promised her that she should get all that was coming to her. Stand up, you lazy-bones!” commanded Stacy sharply, at the same time giving the mare a slap on the stomach. Kitty instantly retaliated by taking a chunk out of the boy’s sleeve, and a wee bit of skin with it.

Stacy howled and jerked away. His face flushed, and he raised a hand to strike

back.

“Don’t do that!” rebuked Grace. “Never, never strike a horse on the head! It is a sure way to spoil an animal. And never punish a horse when you are in anger. Should an animal need punishing, punish him humanely, but trim him so thoroughly that you never may be called upon to repeat the performance.”

“But, she bit me,” protested Stacy.

“Forget it!” laughed Grace.

“I should say that the poor beast is already sufficiently punished after biting Stacy Brown,” observed Emma meekly.

“Be firm, but gentle,” continued Grace. “Kitty is in just the right mood to be spoiled by rough treatment.”

Stacy was not over-gentle. He jerked the white mare about, shook his fist in her face and announced in a loud tone what he would do to her did she ever again try to make a meal out of his arm.

In the meantime Hippy, with an interested group of Overland girls observing, was putting the final touches to the packing, making the lead-ropes fast, using a knot that he had learned, by which, in case of trouble, one can reach from his saddle and jerk the pack free by a single pull on a loose end of a rope.

All was now ready for the start. Woo Smith, with a final look backward, started ahead singing blithely. Hippy whistled “Boots and Saddles.” The Overland ponies knew the signal, but of course the pack-horses did not, though they soon would learn that it was the command to get under way. When a short distance from camp, the pack animals straggled off and sought their own trails near the one that was followed by the riders, Hippy now and then shouting to Woo to keep them up, for the Idler was lagging behind, though she had started out in the lead of the pack-horses. Woo Smith’s “Hi-lee, hi-lo!” sung in the Oriental’s shrill, knife-edge voice kept time for the plodding ponies, that were now climbing up a steep grade. The Overland party were well started on their way to the high places of this wild, rugged country, where genuine adventure awaited them.

CHAPTER XI

PONIES GET A BAD FRIGHT

Up and up traveled the Overland party, the ponies here and there being obliged to zigzag back and forth, picking their way like mountain goats.

The members of the party were keenly interested in watching the pack-horses to see how they acted under these trying circumstances, and, to their satisfaction, found that the animals were thoroughly familiar with their work. The saddle horses of the Overlanders, they had seen in action before, and knew what they could do. Now and then the white mare would poise with all four feet bunched as if she were about to make a leap into space, then slowly one foot would reach out for a footing. Having found it, the other fore foot would follow, then the hind feet, Kitty all the time groaning dismally and wheezing like a leaky valve on a locomotive.

Ordinarily, horses on a trail make an effort to keep within sight of each other, but in this instance Idler, the brown mare, did not appear to care whether she were within or out of sight of her companions. Hippy, when they made the noon luncheon camp, searched his kit for an article that he had brought along, thinking it might prove useful. He did not let the others see what it was, but secreted it on his person. This article was a pea-shooter, and he had the peas to use in it, too.

When the party moved on after luncheon, Hippy dropped behind to better observe the pack-horses. Idler loafed, as usual. Hippy tried the pea-shooter on her, and the brown mare jumped at a critical point. All four feet went out from under her, and she landed on her back, greatly to the detriment of her pack, and, had it not been that the pack was very strong, the outfit she carried would have been ruined.

“Oh, the clumsy beast!” groaned Grace Harlowe.

“What ails the silly creature?” cried Emma.

“She has thrown a fit,” Stacy informed her.

Hippy, whose scheme had exceeded his expectations, sprang from his saddle and ran to the fallen horse, which, by this time, had rolled over on her side. One

foot further and Idler would have slipped down along the rocks a hundred feet or more.

“Stacy! Sit on her head! Fetch me a rope, someone,” urged Lieutenant Wingate.

Passing the rope about the animal, they threw it around a tree above the trail, then began removing the pack, which Tom had loosened by pulling on the pack-rope. Relieved of the weight on her back, Idler, aided by a pull on the rope, struggled to her feet, and, after no little effort, she was gotten back on the narrow trail. About a hundred feet above them, perched on a pinnacle of rock, sat the Honorable Woo Smith, hands lost in his flowing sleeves.

“Hi-lee, hi-lo! hi-lee, hi-lo!” sang the guide.

Stacy shied a pebble at him.

“Will you stop that ‘hi-lee’ business?” he demanded. “It is lucky for you that you are above instead of below me, or I’d roll a rock down on you.”

“Let the cook alone!” ordered Tom Gray. “I don’t understand what caused that beast to lose her footing so suddenly.”

Hippy Wingate, however, understood only too well, but he did not think best to enlighten his companions, who might have found unpleasant remarks to make. A full hour was lost in getting the brown mare and her pack in condition to proceed, then the journey was resumed.

Later in the day, Lieutenant Wingate found occasion to use his pea-shooter again. The first effort in that direction had proved so successful that he could not resist the second shining opportunity that presented itself. This time Stacy was the victim.

Stacy was asleep in his saddle at the time, his pony moping along with head close to the ground, when Hippy sent a pea straight at the tender flank of the animal.

The pony woke up suddenly, and then another pea hit it. The fat boy’s mount bucked beautifully, and Chunky took a long flight, landing head-first in a wild rose bush, howling and struggling, not rightly knowing what had occurred.

“Here, here! What’s going on?” shouted Tom, turning in his saddle.

“Stacy has come a cropper. Oh, please do it again, Stacy. It was beautiful,” urged Emma enthusiastically.

“I—I fell off,” wailed the boy, raising a very red face above the top of the rose bush. “I—I transmigrated, didn’t I, Emma?” Stacy grinned sheepishly. “I’ll trim the beast for that.”

“You will not,” laughed Hippy. “The pony was not to blame in the least.”

As a matter of fact, the pony appeared to be even more amazed at the mishap than were the Overlanders themselves. The excitement ended, and the party once

more under way, Chunky began to ponder over what had occurred, and the more he pondered the more convinced did he become that someone had played a trick on him. He eyed each member of the party narrowly, finally regarding Uncle Hip with suspicion.

“I wonder if he did it?” muttered the boy.

The trail was growing more difficult and perilous with the moments, and the Riders were making not more than a mile-and-a-half an hour, and at one point it curved so sharply that the riders in the lead, in this instance Tom and Stacy, were directly above Lieutenant Wingate, traveling in the opposite direction.

“Hulloa! What’s Uncle Hip up to now?” wondered Stacy, casting suspicious glances at him. Chunky saw something glisten in the hands of Uncle Hip; then he saw him place the glistening object to his lips and blow. Miss Kitty snorted and jumped, after which she quickened her pace.

“So, that’s the game, is it?” grinned Stacy Brown. “I reckon I know now what made me come a cropper into the rose bush. Uncle Hip used a pea-shooter on my pony. Wait till I get an opportunity! I’ll make a show of him for that.”

Tom had halted at the summit, and, shading his eyes, gazed off over the scene before him.

“What do you call that hole down there?” questioned Elfreda.

“That? That is a box canyon,” replied Hippy.

“Are we going down there?” wondered Nora.

“Yes.”

“We’re going to do a giant leap for life to the bottom of the box in a few moments,” Stacy Brown informed her.

Tom removed his sombrero and mopped his forehead.

“I see nothing that looks like a trail,” he declared. “Woo, are you positive that there is a safe way to get down?”

Woo bobbed his head vigorously.

“Him plenty good way. You no savvy tlail?”

Tom shook his head.

“Me savvy tlail. You come. Me show.”

“Never mind, Woo. We are going to find that trail for ourselves. This isn’t the first time we have been in the mountains. You watch us,” answered Lieutenant Wingate.

Hippy crawled down the mountainside for some distance, working along, first to the right, then to the left. He observed, at the same time, that the wall on the opposite side of the canyon had a more gradual slope. Climbing the other side would be easier than the one they were now going down. There was no trace of a trail on the Overlanders’ side, but Hippy found a way to get down.

“Well?” questioned Grace, upon his return.

“We can make it.”

“Of course we can make it. We shall have to jump, though,” said Stacy.

“Suppose you jump first, then, if the jumping is good, perhaps we may follow,” suggested Emma.

“Jump? Why, you wouldn’t dare jump off from a silver dollar,” declared Chunky.

“Produce one and see whether I dare or not,” offered Emma.

“I—I don’t think I have one,” stammered Stacy amid laughter.

“All ready,” announced Lieutenant Wingate, mounting and starting down the sharp incline. The others watched him for a few moments, then followed, the pack animals taking their places without being urged, not at all disturbed over the perilous descent. Hippy was now taking a zig-zag course, which was the only safe way, unless one preferred to adopt Stacy’s suggestion and jump. To look at the mountain, traveling down its steep side would seem to the novice an impossibility. However, ponies familiar with mountain climbing are sure-footed and unafraid, and do some remarkable climbing, frequently going where a tenderfoot would hesitate to crawl on hands and knees.

Here and there were small trees, with an occasional growth of bushes, which afforded more or less protection from a bad fall, but on other parts of the trail the rocks sloped away for hundreds of feet, lying smooth and glaring in the bright afternoon sunlight. The Overland Riders took the descent without any display of nervousness, but Kitty, the pack-horse, groaned and grunted all the way down. One would imagine that she was suffering agonies, but it was simply habit with her, and she got no sympathy, though now and then she did feel the sting of a pebble that one or another of the party hurled at her.

Lieutenant Wingate was making much more rapid progress than his companions, he being eager to reach the bottom before the light failed them, for it would not do at all to be caught on the side of the mountain after dark. A shout from below told them that he had reached the valley. It was answered by another shout from above, then a “Hi-lee, hi-lo!” in the high-pitched voice of the guide. A stone came bumping down not far from Woo.

“Stacy, did you throw that stone?” shouted Hippy.

“I did.”

“Stop it! You might hit someone.”

“I want to hit someone. I want to wing that song-bird, and I’ll do it yet,” threatened Chunky.

The safe arrival of the rest of the Overland party at the bottom of the pit put a stop to further gaiety at the expense of the guide. They found themselves in a

valley about a quarter of a mile in width and of unknown length. The place was a meadow in the heart of the mountains, carpeted with the brown California grass that did not appeal to the appetites of the horses, and as soon as the animals were turned out they made haste to climb the opposite slope in search of the succulent greens that they seemed to know they should find up there.

In the meantime, preparations for making camp and getting supper were going on systematically down in the canyon. It was an ideal place for camping, sheltered from storm, and from sunshine during the early and late hours of the day. A clear, cold brook rippled merrily on their side of the canyon, its waters leaping from the black rocks or lying in sombre bank-shadowed pools; and, despite the apparent dryness of the landscape, gorgeous bush-flowers bloomed, filling the air with their perfume, the valley farther down being a riot of varied colors where the stream had left its banks and spread out over the lower land.

"Oh, girls, isn't this fairyland?" breathed Elfreda Briggs.

"Wonderful!" agreed Grace.

"All but the fairies," answered Stacy.

"We have a gnome," suggested Emma, glancing at Chunky. "Fairies don't stuff themselves. They live on atmosphere."

"This fairy doesn't live on atmosphere," retorted Stacy. "He takes his belt off, if necessary, too."

"I would suggest that you take it off now and get to work. We have plenty of it to do," reminded Tom Gray.

All hands turned to, to help the cook, for they were hungry, and it was natural that they should be, for climbing mountains in the High Country is hard, grilling work.

Supper was a busy rather than a lively affair, but after supper the Overlanders found their tongues and were soon engaged in good-natured raillery, but they were quite ready to turn in when Tom Gray whistled "taps." This time there was no hesitancy on the part of anyone to sleeping on the ground, and they dropped off to sleep with the tinkling of the bells of the pack-horses in their ears, the rich perfumes of flowers in their nostrils, their senses lulled pleasantly by the song of the locusts and strange insects that none remembered ever to have heard of before.

The camp was awake shortly after daybreak. Once more Stacy Brown had to be urged forth to wrangle the horses. He protested loudly when Elfreda pointed to the opposite slope, which Chunky must climb, for the animals were nowhere in sight.

"I suppose I might as well go out. I always get the fag-end of the stick," grumbled Stacy.

"Never mind, Chunky. I'll fetch the horses," offered Tom.

"No, no. I just wanted to say something," returned Stacy, hastily stirring himself into activity and jumping on the bare back of his pony. No sooner was he on than he was off again, for the pony had never been ridden without a saddle, and promptly bucked when his owner mounted. Stacy landed flat on his back in the campfire, sending up a shower of sparks and smoke, and it was only the quick action of Nora Wingate that saved him from being burned. As it was, his clothing was smoking when he was dragged out. Hippy and Tom put Stacy's fire out by grabbing the boy up and throwing him in the creek, where Stacy rolled over whooping and howling his disapproval of the entire proceeding.

"You should have known better than to try to ride that pony without a saddle," rebuked Hippy.

Stacy turned angrily on his now meek-eyed pony.

"You donkey! Oh, you doddering idiot!" he raged, shaking a fist at the animal. "You'll pay for that! You'll rue the day and the minute that you bucked me off your back. Where is my saddle?"

"Never mind. I will get the ponies," grinned Hippy. "You aren't fit."

"I am. I'm always fit. I'll get 'em myself."

"Be sure to bring back the donkey," teased Emma.

Stacy cinched on his saddle before starting, and this time the little animal offered no protest, but galloped away as docile as could be desired. After he had left them, the Overlanders had a good laugh at his expense, then began packing in preparation for the day's journey.

The Overlanders finally began to wonder what had become of Stacy, for he had been absent much longer than seemed necessary, then, all at once they heard a yell on the opposite side of the canyon.

"There he is! He is in trouble again," cried Tom, starting for his own pony.

"See him come! He will break his neck," worried Nora.

Tom halted at his pony's side, for he had discovered something else. Right on the heels of Stacy's mount came the saddle-ponies and the pack-horses. The latter, being hobbled, were hopping like kangaroos, making long leaps, covering a great deal of ground in each leap and turning their heads to glance back with almost every jump.

"What can be the matter?" wondered Grace, anxiously watching the descent of the fat boy. Every second she expected to see him come a cropper and fall the remaining distance down the mountainside, but Chunky did nothing of the sort. He stuck tightly to his saddle, now and then casting apprehensive glances back at the horses that were tearing along in his wake.

Lieutenant Wingate, suddenly surmising what the trouble was about, ran for

his rifle.

“Wha—at is it?” stammered Emma Dean.

“They are stampeding. Something is chasing them. I think I know what it is,” answered Hippy, darting across the canyon, clearing rocks and other obstructions in a series of lively leaps, the others of his party standing gaping, wondering, some of them a little fearful, especially for the safety of the panic-stricken Chunky.

CHAPTER XII

AMID THE GIANT SEQUOIAS

Stacy swept past, flinging back some unintelligible words, the ponies still tearing along after him. The Overland Riders shouted with laughter at the funny antics of the hobbled pack-horses. Kitty had forgotten to groan, and Idler was imbued with a new spirit of activity.

For the moment the outfit had forgotten all about Lieutenant Wingate. When finally they thought to look for him he was nowhere in sight.

“Hippy! Oh, Hippy!” hailed Tom Gray.

No answer came back from Hippy, who was stalking the mysterious something that had stampeded the ponies.

“What is it?” cried the Overlanders in one voice, as Stacy rode back to them wide-eyed.

“I don’t know. It was something big and awful. I couldn’t see all of it, but it looked to me like an elephant. Maybe it was a Bengal tiger, but I didn’t wait to see. If I had waited, the ponies would have run right over me. When I saw them coming I threw on the high-speed lever and lit out for home. I transmigrated. Where is my rifle? I am going back after that beast, whatever it may be and—”

“There goes Hippy across that open space,” cried Grace, pointing.

“Yes, and he is after something,” added Tom.

“Look! Oh, look!” cried Emma.

All eyes were turned in the direction indicated by Grace. They saw a dark object moving across the open space towards Hippy, then saw the lieutenant raise his rifle and fire. Still the object came on.

“It’s a bear! Hippy’s missed!” groaned Tom.

“I’ll wager my hat that Uncle Hippy didn’t miss,” answered Stacy. “He never misses—when he hits.”

Hippy raised his rifle and fired again.

“That was a hit!” cried Grace.

Stacy galloped his pony up the other side of the mountain.

“Came near making a meal of you, didn’t he, Uncle Hip?” called Stacy as he came up with Lieutenant Wingate.

Hippy shook his head.

“I tried to shoot him between the eyes, but he dodged as I pulled the trigger. Next time I couldn’t do any fine aiming because the bear was too close. Do you see what he is—a big cinnamon bear? I am going to have that skin. Go back and tell them to wait until I finish this job, and that we are going to have bear steak for supper to-night.”

Stacy galloped back with the message, then Tom rode out to assist in the skinning and to select such meat as he wished to carry with them. The bearskin proved to be very heavy, but Hippy insisted on taking it along, first, however, treating the skin so that it would keep until they reached a place where the curing and tanning might be continued.

Woo, upon observing the bear skin and the steaks taken from the animal, lapsed into song, which Stacy pretended not to hear. It irritated Chunky to listen to that “Hi-lee, hi-lo!” and put him into a fighting humor.

An hour after their delayed start they topped the rise on the opposite side of the canyon and paused to gaze over the peaks and rugged mountain-tops that lay before them in a vast panorama. Over yonder in the clouds hung the snow-capped peaks of the High Sierras, now and then taking on a purple shade from some tinted cloud.

“It doesn’t seem possible that we shall be able to make those mountains with our ponies, does it?” wondered Elfreda.

“Are we going there?” demanded Stacy.

“I believe so.”

“Hm-m-m-m!”

“Are you getting cold feet already?” teased Emma.

“Not yet, but I expect to when I get in those chilly looking snow-caps off yonder,” answered Stacy quickly. “This life is just one ridge after another.”

They had mounted ridges, and crossed broad and narrow valleys for some time without incident and the steady creak of saddle straps and girths was becoming monotonous, when suddenly Grace’s pony jumped clear of the ground with all four feet and began to back. Grace Harlowe, instantly understanding, called “Look out!” and whirled her pony about.

“What is the trouble, Grace?” called Tom, who was riding farther to the rear.

“A snake! I heard it, but do not know where it is.”

“Stay back. I will find him and dispatch him,” shouted Hippy, hurrying forward.

“Send him a message for me while you are about it. Tell him Emma Dean

wishes him to transmigrate,” chortled Stacy.

Just then Lieutenant Wingate discovered the snake, and raising his rifle he aimed it over the head of his pony for a few seconds, then pulled the trigger.

“Did you get him?” shouted Nora.

“Of course he did. My Uncle Hip never misses anything,” declared Stacy.

“No. Not even food,” added Emma.

“You may all get off. I am going to skin the reptile. He is a fine specimen,” announced Lieutenant Wingate. “I propose to make a hat band of him. It isn’t everyone who can wear a rattler around his sombrero, you know.”

“I’ll say that was a fine shot,” declared Stacy.

“Yes, but not better than almost any other person could make,” differed Emma Dean.

“Velly fine. Me savvy fine shot,” interjected the Chinaman.

“Emma, in a way, is right,” spoke up Grace. “It does not take any sort of marksmanship at all to shoot the head from a rattler. Even a person who never has fired a gun in his life should be able to shoot one.”

Hippy laughed.

“You don’t believe it. Suppose you let Emma try it when next we meet a snake. Point your rifle at a rattler and he will line his head up with the muzzle. Move the muzzle from side to side and he will follow it, always keeping his head in line with it. Then, all you have to do is pull the trigger. Why, I believe I could shoot and hit one with my eyes shut. I think I should like to make the experiment next time we see a rattler,” said Grace.

“Never mind; never mind! We will take your word for it,” protested Stacy Brown. “We do not need a public demonstration.”

“It surely would be interesting,” agreed Elfreda.

“Oh, all right. Just let me know when the show is coming off and I’ll have business on the other side of the mountain,” declared the fat boy.

During this temporary halt the pack-horses had plodded on alone. They made a detour of the spot where the snake was being skinned, seeming instinctively to know where they were expected to go, and soon after they started off, Woo Smith followed with his “Hi-lee, hi-lo!”

About midday they topped a range of hills, and before them saw revealed a vast forest that stretched over more miles of mountain country than they cared to try to estimate. At first they had no idea of the bigness of the trees; it was merely a great forest.

Lieutenant Wingate, who had been gazing inquiringly at the scene, fanning himself with his sombrero, turned to his companions.

“Good people, you are now gazing on some of the big trees of California of

which you no doubt have heard or read much. Before you lies the world-famous Sequoia forest. Let us push on. When you are among the trees you will get a better idea of their great height.”

“You should have been a guide on a sightseeing bus,” averred Emma, as the Overlanders rode on.

The party reached the edge of the great forest some two hours later, where, in the cool shadows, they halted for a rest.

“I am told,” resumed Hippy pompously, “that this forest comprises more than five thousand specimens of trees.”

“And you will also observe,” announced Emma Dean, standing up in her stirrups and waving her sombrero, “that many of them are from ten to twenty feet in diameter. At the great height to which they grow, the least leaning either way would cause the trees to break off. You will observe, also, the perfect symmetry of the trees. They are perfect works of art,” finished Emma, resuming her seat on the saddle.

“Hooray!” shouted Stacy Brown. “Emma has transmigrated again.”

Emma’s companions looked at her in amazement, then burst out laughing.

“Where in the world did you learn all that, darlin’?” questioned Nora Wingate admiringly.

“I heard the postmaster at Gardner telling Hippy about it,” answered Emma meekly, amid shouts of laughter at Lieutenant Wingate’s expense.

The scene was so impressive that the laughter of the Overland Riders soon died away, for the great silence of this wonderful forest had taken strong hold on them. Whereas all other forests in which they had traveled, were continually nodding and murmuring, the giant Sequoias stood in absolute calm. Tom Gray explained this silence by saying that, owing to their great height, the trunks were solid, the branches rigid and the movement very slight. Even though there might be some slight murmurings, the tops were so far above the ground that the human ear could not catch the faint rustling up there.

As the party moved on through the silent forest aisles, the bigness of the trees grew upon them.

“You savvy big tlees?” asked Woo Smith finally, after a long period of silence on his part.

The Overlanders nodded.

“Do you know where there is a spring or a creek?” asked Tom.

“Me savvy spling,” nodded Woo.

“Lead us to it. Is it far from here?”

The guide answered with a shake of his head.

An hour later, no water being yet in sight, Grace called a halt.

“Woo, I do not believe you savvy any spring at all,” she said. “I think we should camp right where we are. It will soon be dark, and if we keep on going we shall undoubtedly be worse off than if we remain where we are. Smith, have you lost the trail?” she demanded.

Woo did not reply at once, but gazed up at the tops of the trees, muttering to himself.

“You’re lost! That’s what’s the matter,” grinned Stacy.

“Woo no lost. Tlail him lost. Me savvy tlail lost,” chuckled the Chinaman.

“I thought so,” agreed Hippy gravely. “There being no objection, I second Grace’s motion that we camp here.”

“While you are making camp I will go out and prospect for water,” offered Tom, wheeling his pony about and riding off into the forest. Tom, being a forester by profession, an experienced woodsman, they felt no concern over his departure, but, as the hours following his departure wore on and Tom Gray did not return, the Overlanders began to worry.

At nine o’clock they began firing signals at intervals, and Woo Smith built up a blazing fire, but there was no response to either signal. Grace Harlowe was the least worried of the party.

“We will have supper,” she said. “Tom will be all right. Should he be lost it will not be the first time.”

“Yes, but what if he doesn’t find himself?” questioned Emma tremulously.

“In that event he will make camp and sleep in the forest, so you folks make your beds and turn in for a good night’s sleep, just as I am going to do,” urged Grace.

“Hi-lee, hi-lo!” chanted Woo.

“Stop that noise, will you!” commanded Chunky. “I am not in the mood for song this evening, and I might do you bodily harm,” he added, starting to prepare his bed. This he did by smoothing the ground with an axe swung adz-wise between his legs, then filling in the open space with dry pine needles. The Overlanders observed his work in interested silence.

“You do know how to do something, don’t you?” approved Emma.

“Someone in the outfit has to have a head with him,” retorted Chunky. “It makes me sleepy to look at it. If I weren’t sleepy I would make beds in the same way for you girls. Let Uncle Hip do it, I can’t keep awake long enough. Good night!” Stacy lay down, and the others quickly cradled under their blankets and went to sleep, watched over by the huge Sequoias that had stood sentinel on that very spot for hundreds of years.

Then, all at once, it was morning. The songs of birds filled the air, and a squirrel, whisking its tail nervously, chattered on a giant tree trunk, then darted

up out of sight.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMP AT THE "LAZY J"

Stacy sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"What did you wake me up for?" he demanded. "Hulloa, Tom!"

"I awakened you by transmigration of thought," answered Emma. "Oh, girls, girls, wake up! Tom is here," she cried.

The camp was instantly aroused. Tom was discovered sitting calmly by a little fire that he had built, waiting for the sleepers to awaken. Tom had done exactly what Grace said he would. When he lost his bearings in the darkness, he lay down to wait for daylight. When daylight came he found no difficulty in picking up his trail and returning to camp.

"Did you find water?" demanded Hippy.

"Not a drop. For that reason, we must take a quick breakfast and hurry on. I think we shall find water beyond the next low range, and it is necessary that we do so before the sun gets high and hot. We can stand it for some time longer, but the horses cannot."

The start was made soon after that, Tom and Hippy packing their belongings while Woo and the girls were getting breakfast. The trail they followed took them up a gradual slope for several miles and then pitched giddily into a deep canyon, a canyon that covered all of fifty acres, from which the hills rose in great swells into the far distance. The climb down the side of the mountain was tiresome and difficult, but they forgot their discomfort when finally they came upon a stream of cold, sparkling water that came down from the snow-capped tips of the High Sierras.

"Oh, look!" cried Emma. "Cows! Now we can have some milk."

"Cows!" groaned Stacy. "Those aren't cows, they are cattle."

There were loud exclamations of wonder when the Overlanders saw a lot of cattle, in charge of several herders, grazing less than a mile away. After permitting the horses to drink all that was good for them, and after the Overlanders themselves had drunk and filled their water bottles, they galloped

on towards the herd. From the herders they learned that the cattle belonged to the "Lazy J" ranch. The animals were on their summer grazing grounds, having come up into the hills for the summer months.

The herders informed the Overlanders that the ranch-house was about five miles due east of there, and that the boss would be glad to see them.

"My horse has a loose shoe. Is there a blacksmith outfit over there?" asked Hippy.

"Sure," answered a herder. "You'll have to do your own smithing, though."

"I reckon I can do that all right," answered Lieutenant Wingate. "We can make camp there and have a rest before we undertake the next hard climb."

After waving good-byes to the herders, the Overland Riders resumed their journey, arriving at the "Lazy J" ranch about mid-afternoon. They were warmly welcomed by Mr. Giddings, the foreman, who showed his amazement that a party of young women should have made the rough ride into the mountains.

"Help yourselves to anything in sight. It's all yours," he offered. "Glad to have you take pot luck with me in my shack. There isn't much, but what there is you are welcome to."

"No. You sit down with us and have a snack," urged Grace.

Mr. Giddings did so, and after a late luncheon he conducted Hippy to the blacksmith shop, where Lieutenant Wingate removed the loose shoe from his pony and straightening it on the anvil proceeded to nail it back in place, observed interestedly by the Overlanders and several cowboys who were resting up at the ranch-house. Even the cowboys' cook came out, frying-pan in hand, to see how the tenderfoot would go about it to shoe a horse.

The cowboys looked on with solemn visages, expressive of neither approval nor disapproval. Their interest quickened, however, when Stacy Brown announced that he was going to remove a loose shoe from the off hind foot of the white mare, Kitty, and set it properly in place.

Kitty was led in, and Chunky made his preparations with sundry flourishes to show the spectators that he knew what he was about. Kitty was not unobservant, and every move of the Overland boy was narrowly watched by her.

"I should advise you to watch her ears," urged Grace.

"It isn't her ears, it's those hind feet that I am interested in," replied Stacy. "Ears can't hurt a fellow—feet can," he said. "Whoa, you brute!" added Stacy, running a hand down one of the pony's hind legs, then lifting the foot from the ground.

What followed was almost too swift for the human eye. Barely had the foot been lifted than Kitty kicked the boy clear out of the shop. In his flight, Chunky was catapulted against the cook, and both went down in a heap.

The faces of the cow-punchers relaxed. They howled, fired their revolvers into the air and went fairly wild with joy, while Grace and Elfreda disentangled Stacy and the cowboys' cook and stood them on their feet.

“Are You Hurt?”

“Are you hurt?” begged Grace solicitously.

“Of course I am. I’m killed, but the white mare is going to get worse than I did,” threatened the fat boy.

“Cool off. Don’t punish her now,” advised Elfreda.

“I don’t want to cool off. I want to shoe that beast.” Stacy strode belligerently to the now meek little animal. “I ought to break your miserable neck, but I haven’t time to do it to-day. Besides, the weather is too warm. If I did, this outfit would make me dig a hole and bury you. I always get the worst of it when trying to do a good turn for others. Now you stand still or I’ll surely forget myself.”

This time Kitty made no objection to having her loose shoe removed, but once off Stacy did not know how to put it on again, and Tom Gray had to finish the job to the great enjoyment of the cowboys. The job finally finished, Stacy and Hippy perspiring from their efforts, the Overlanders went out to watch the range men come in, uttering wild whoops as they discovered that there were women in camp.

Throwing themselves from their saddles, the range men soused their heads in the creek that flowed near the ranch-house, and were ready for the evening meal. After supper, all hands lounged out to the green in front of the bunkhouse, smoked their pipes and told thrilling stories of adventure in the Sierras—told them for the benefit of the tenderfeet who were their guests.

The Overland girls chatted with the rough but big-hearted cow punchers, who, that night, declared that they never had come up with such a likely bunch of young women.

When Mr. Giddings learned from Tom Gray that the party was bound for the High Sierras, he shook his head dubiously.

“No place for white folk, especially women,” he warned.

“Why not?” questioned Tom.

“Trouble! It’s the Devil’s country up there.”

“We are used to roughing it under all sorts of conditions,” replied Tom. “We learned how to do that during the Great War. All these young women were in the

service, at or near the front in France; Mr. Wingate was an aviator, and I was a Captain of Engineers, so you see we aren't afraid of trouble."

"That's all right. I take off my hat to you, especially to the young ladies. This country is another breed of cats, however, and they tell strange stories about men going up there and never being found afterwards, or, as is sometimes the case, found dead in the Crazy Lake section. Aerial Lake, they call it."

"Where is this mysterious lake?" asked Miss Briggs.

"I don't rightly know. I don't know anything about it. I reckon I don't want to know. Neither would you if you had been up here long and had heard as much about it as I have. Did you ever hear of the Jones gang?"

"I reckon we have. We had a little mix-up with them. At least, we understand that was the outfit," Hippy informed them.

"Yes, and we drove them off and gave them a good walloping," added Stacy.

"Let's hear the yarn," called a cowboy.

Hippy related the story of the hold-up and of the skirmish that followed, resulting in the driving off of the train robbers. The cowboys listened attentively, their expressions showing an increasing respect for the "tenderfeet" who had dropped in on them for a friendly call.

"Why should this band of outlaws have reason to interfere with us?" asked Tom.

"Why do they bother other folks?" answered Mr. Giddings. "For what they can get out of it, of course," he said, answering his own question.

"They will not get much if they hold us up," Grace Harlowe informed their hosts.

"No. I reckon that would not likely put you in peril, for the reason that they are after bigger game, like that treasure on the Red Limited. There's another thing, though, that might make it equally bad for you people."

"What is that, Mr. Giddings?" asked Elfreda.

"The railroad has had Pinkerton detectives after that gang for a long time, on account of an express robbery, which makes the gang rather touchy about strangers being in the mountains."

"Where does this Jones crowd make its headquarters?" questioned Hippy.

"That's just the point. Nobody seems to know, but they are supposed to hang out to the eastward of this place. We have never seen any of them since I have been on this range, which is going on five years."

"Then we do not have to bother our heads about them at all," announced Tom. "We are not going in that direction."

"You're going to the peak, aren't you?" asked Giddings.

"Yes," replied Grace.

“Hm-m-m-m-m! I’ll bet I know what you folks are after. You’re after golden trout. You’re not the first parties to come up here looking for those shiny fellows.”

“Eh? What’s that?” questioned Hippy, instantly on the alert.

“Where are they? I’m the boy that is looking for gold,” spoke up Stacy.

“Maybe there ain’t any such thing,” laughed Giddings. “But they do tell a story about a prospector coming across a stream up Farewell Gap way, where the golden trout were as thick as pollywogs in a mud puddle.”

Tom said he had never heard of them. Giddings replied that he reckoned no one else ever had in reality.

“They do say,” resumed the foreman, “that when the fisherman discovered those fellows basking in the sun at the bottom of the stream, he sure thought he had struck it rich. He believed that he had found sure-enough gold nuggets, but when he went to gather them, the nuggets just up and dusted.”

“That’s the way nuggets usually do,” answered Stacy wisely.

“I hope we find them,” said Hippy. “I have a rod and a book of flies with me.”

“It’s enough to give a fellow heart disease, anyway,” continued Giddings. “So, between the Joneses, the lake and the movable nuggets, you folks have plenty of entertainment ahead of you.”

“There is generally excitement and some trouble where we hang up our hats,” laughed Nora Wingate, “but we manage somehow to get along all right.”

“I wish you luck, pardner,” nodded Mr. Giddings. “I’ll have a bunk-house cleaned out for you folks to-night, so you can sleep indoors,” he offered.

Thanking him, but declaring that they preferred to sleep in the open, just as they had been doing for several seasons, the Overlanders made camp out of doors just beyond the corral. The night was hot and the flies very thick. The night’s rest was not at all satisfying for this reason, and for the added one that the cowpunchers’ ponies in the corral were restless. Hippy said it indicated that a storm was coming, but Stacy differed with him. He averred that the ponies were restless for the same reason that he was—because the flies bit them—and the Overlanders laughingly agreed that there might be something in the fat boy’s reasoning after all.

Next morning they were out with the earliest of the punchers. After breakfast, packs were made up and lashed with firm hitches thrown about them. Then bidding good-bye to their hosts and shaking hands all around, the Overland Riders set out for their long journey over the mountains—a journey that would occupy some weeks and be filled with exciting as well as enjoyable experiences.

CHAPTER XIV

WOO'S EYES ARE KEEN

The air was becoming chilly, the Overland Riders now being at an altitude of nearly eight thousand feet, and still upward bound.

A week had elapsed since they left the "Lazy J" ranch, and during all that time they had sighted no game except some grouse that they had shot at but failed to bring down. Provisions were at a low ebb and all knew that they were nearly face to face with a serious situation.

Hippy Wingate was pondering deeply when they pulled up for luncheon one noon. He was wondering what he was going to give his party for supper, for Hippy was the official game-hunter of the Overland party, and they had come to rely on his resourcefulness to provide food for them. Stacy Brown was even more deeply interested in this matter than was "Uncle Hip," but for a somewhat different reason.

"What do we eat to-day?" he asked in a tone that he tried to make sound light-hearted.

Some one laughed.

"Oh, it's not because I'm hungry," hastily explained Chunky. "I just wanted to know so as not to have to open all the packs unless we are going to have a spread."

"Ours is more likely to be a snack than a spread," suggested Grace laughingly.

"What is it going to be, Hippy?" questioned Nora.

"Raisins and hard tack, my dear."

"You don't mean it?" gasped the fat boy.

"I reckon that will be about it if I don't see some game to shoot at," replied Hippy a little soberly.

"Raisins and hard tack for a man with an appetite like mine," groaned Stacy. "You might as well feed a bricklayer on angel food and expect him to smack his lips and pat his stomach with heavenly satisfaction. This is too much, and too much is enough."

"If you folks will camp here I will go out and see if I cannot scare up some game," suggested Hippy.

"I do not believe you will find anything worth while at this altitude," said Tom Gray. "It is a condition that I have feared we should meet. I—"

"You no savvy game?" interjected the Chinaman.

"No, Smith," replied Hippy. "We savvy plenty appetite, but we no savvy anything with which to satisfy it. If I could sight a deer—"

"Me savvy deer. Me show buck in lelet," cried Woo, gesticulating excitedly.

"What kind of heathen talk is that?" wondered Emma.

"Buck in lelet!" mocked Stacy.

Hippy was eyeing the guide inquiringly, knowing very well that Woo had something in mind.

"Buck in lelet," repeated the Chinaman, indicating the horns on a deer's head, with his hands.

"I understand," nodded Tom Gray. "What he is trying to say is, 'buck in velvet.'"

"Ha, ha! The further they go the worse they are. First it was Emma Dean whose wheels went wrong; now it is my Uncle Hip and Captain Gray," jeered Stacy. "Is it the altitude that has gone to *your* head?"

"No, it has not," retorted Lieutenant Wingate. "Woo has more sense than all of us together. At this season of the year the bucks 'carry their antlers in velvet.'"

"Oh, pooh! That is a fine fairy tale to feed hungry people with. Folks back east might swallow it, but not up here among the high and lofty peaks of the Sierras. Tell me something that I can swallow," laughed Stacy.

"Stacy, if you will hold your horses I will try to explain," rebuked Tom. "At this season of the year the antlers of the bucks are very tender, and that condition is called 'carrying the antlers in velvet.' In those circumstances the bucks frequent the high rocky peaks that their tender horns may not be torn off in contact with tough bushes and trees. Later on you will find the bucks on the lower ranges. Then, as the antlers become hard, almost as hard as iron, the bucks take to the dense thickets."

Stacy Brown mopped his forehead.

"Emma, why don't you transmigrate a little? Send a little thought wave out and see if you can't get in touch with a nice fat buck all dressed up in velvet," he suggested.

Emma Dean elevated her nose, but made no reply. She was at that moment more interested in the guide, who was running his yellow fingers about his wrists inside the wide sleeves, and chuckling to himself at a rapid-fire rate.

"Me savvy! Hi-lee, hi-lo; hi—"

“What were you going to say?” urged Hippy.

“You savvy buck in lelet?”

Lieutenant Wingate shook his head.

“Me savvy buck.”

“You do? Where?”

The guide pointed his long, bony finger towards the rocks on the other side of a narrow pass in the mountains. The mountain there was covered with brownish grass and some spindling saplings. Lieutenant Wingate looked until his eyes ached, then turned to Smith.

“Woo, you must be mistaken,” he said.

The guide took the stick that he used to beat up the trail ahead on his march each day, laid it across a rock, and, after sighting it, beckoned to Lieutenant Wingate to look over it.

“You savvy?” he questioned eagerly.

“No, I don’t, Woo.”

“Mebby you savvy to-mollow,” replied the Chinaman disgustedly.

The Overland Riders snickered, and even Hippy grinned appreciatively.

“I reckon you are not far from right, Woo. I—” Hippy paused abruptly. Out of that mass of brown something began to grow into his vision, to stand out until everything else appeared to have disappeared.

“You savvy nicee piecee buck?” chuckled the guide.

Hippy reached a cautious hand behind him.

“My rifle. Quick!” he whispered. “Woo is right. There lays a fine big fellow behind that bush over yonder. I don’t know whether he sees us or not. It is a dead sure shot, too. Don’t make a sound,” urged lieutenant Wingate as his rifle was cautiously laid in his outstretched hand.

Placing it across the rock where Woo had laid the stick for him to sight over, Hippy took careful aim a little below the base of the antlers of the buck. His automatic rifle belched forth a deafening roar that went rolling and echoing from peak to peak.

At the same instant, what appeared to be a dull brown and white ball leaped into the air and went bounding away in tremendous leaps. Hippy’s rifle went to his shoulder and he fired again, but the shot only served to hasten the speed of the fine large buck that Woo Smith had discovered. Hippy had missed a “sure shot” as well as a long shot.

“Uncle Hip never misses what he shoots at,” quoted Emma a little maliciously.

“Why don’t you use your pea-shooter?” scoffed Stacy. “Dead Shot Hip made a mess of it that time.”

“He did,” admitted Hippy, “and Stacy Brown missed a fine fat meal. Laugh at me all you like, folks. I deserve it, but I don’t understand how I could miss that shot.”

“Don’t wolly till to-morrow,” advised the guide wisely.

“May I look at your rifle?” asked Grace.

Lieutenant Wingate handed it to her and Grace gave it a critical inspection, then held it out to Hippy.

“Look it over carefully. I think you will discover why you missed,” she suggested.

Hippy intuitively glanced at the sights, and shot a quick look of inquiry at Chunky, but Chunky’s face was woodeny in its lack of expression. Without another word, Lieutenant Wingate set up a mark, placed his rifle on the rock, marking its exact position, and, taking careful aim, fired. The bullet shot under by more than a foot, whereas it should have shot over the mark, the rifle being originally sighted for a much longer distance. Several cartridges were expended in resighting the weapon and adjusting the open sight, which he found had been changed from its former position.

“There, now! Show me another deer. I don’t believe I shall miss the next one.”

“You savvy sight no good,” chuckled the Chinaman.

Lieutenant Wingate nodded.

“Stacy, come here. I would hold converse with thee,” he ordered.

Stacy complied, but with evident reluctance, and, obeying a gesture from Hippy, seated himself on a slab of granite beside his Uncle Hip.

“Why did you fool with the sights on my rifle?” demanded Lieutenant Wingate sharply.

“I—I—I—”

“Don’t quibble. Whenever you put on a wooden face I know that you have been up to monkey-shines. Why did you do it?”

“I—I—I just wanted to get even with you, Uncle Hip,” stammered the fat boy.

“For what?”

“You—you pinked my pony with a peashooter and made me come a cropper in a rose bush. Don’t you deny it. You know you did,” added Chunky, adopting his most savage tone.

Hippy Wingate chuckled.

“That is it, eh?”

“Yes.”

“When did you change them—change the open sights?”

“I did it when you were after water last night.”

“Shake, pard!” cried Hippy, extending an impulsive hand. “We are quits now,

aren't we?"

"Yes, we are dear friends. We're more than that—we love each other most to death," declared Stacy fervently.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Emma Dean. "You make me weary."

"But, Stacy, the next time you wish to get even with a fellow, please do not tamper with his weapons, especially in a country like this," warned Lieutenant Wingate. "It is a dangerous thing to do. Suppose I had met up with a cinnamon bear at close range, for instance—what do you think would have happened?"

"I reckon there would have been a sprinting match between you and the cinnamon," observed Stacy in a tone that brought a shout of laughter from the Overland girls.

"You are partly right," agreed Hippy laughingly, "but don't do anything like that again, will you?"

Stacy promised that he would not, but the probabilities are that he forgot the promise within five minutes after he had made it, for at that instant Woo Smith uttered a sudden exclamation that drew the instant attention of the Overland Riders.

"Me savvy buck! Me savvy buck in lelet," chuckled the Chinaman excitedly.

Hippy was on his feet in an instant.

"Where, where?"

"You savvy him white lock?"

"Yes, I see the white rock. Sure enough; there he is!"

When the automatic roared a moment later, a brown ball was seen to leap into the air, but, instead of bounding away, it straightened out and took a long, curving leap, crashed into the dwarfed bushes, then whipped over on its back.

"I got him!" shouted Lieutenant Wingate triumphantly.

"Great shot!" cried Elfreda Briggs enthusiastically.

"Hi-lee, hi-lo; hi-lee, hi-lo!" sang the guide, hopping about delightedly, his queue wriggling in the air with serpent-like movements. This time no one appeared to be irritated by Woo's singing, for Lieutenant Wingate's shot meant food in plenty for the Overland Riders.

CHAPTER XV

FOLLOWING THE AERIAL TRAIL

Shouting and laughing, the entire party raced down the hill and up the other side to view the result of Lieutenant Wingate's shot. They found the buck lying dead where it had fallen, with a bullet hole through its head.

"Can my Uncle Hip shoot? Well, I reckon he can," declared Stacy pompously. "Cleverness runs in our family," boasted Stacy.

"That quality must have exhausted itself before you joined the family," retorted Emma.

Stacy admitted that he had lost some of it after becoming a member of the Overland Riders, which, he said, was undoubtedly due to association with inferior intellects, to which Emma had no reply to make, other than characteristically elevating her nose and turning her back on the fat boy.

"Come, come," urged Hippy. "Stacy, you and Tom will have to help me dress this beast if you want meat. It is certain that we shall not starve today."

The job of dressing the buck was accomplished clumsily, the Overland girls being interested spectators and offering frequent suggestions on the subject, of which they knew nothing.

That night the Riders enjoyed a great spread. Following it, such of the meat as they wished to carry with them they spitted on sharp sticks in the smoke of the camp-fire. This was the beginning of the curing process required to put the meat in condition to keep, so that they might carry it along, for the party did not dare trust to the chance of finding other game farther on, fearing that they again might be caught foodless. One experience of the kind was enough.

Lieutenant Wingate and his companions had learned a lesson in observation from the guide, and Hippy began to understand that a hunter, when after game, must put out of his mind every object in the landscape except the particular thing for which he is looking. He tried out that idea that same day by looking for various objects, one at a time, and was amazed at the result. Under this method, objects that he had not before observed at all now stood out with great

prominence. Hippy then recalled what an old hunter, then sniping Germans, had told him in France: "Let your eyes sweep quickly over the landscape but pay no attention to the more prominent objects, and you will be amazed at the quickness with which you will discover that for which you are looking."

The method worked out just as Hippy's informant had said it would, and Hippy determined never again to be caught napping. However, his respect for the guide had increased considerably, and especially for the keenness of Woo Smith's eyes.

With all the venison they could carry packed in their kits, the party set out early on the following morning and soon found themselves on the brink of another box-canyon, which they reached without mishap, then made their way up the side of another mountain, and on over a series of rugged elevations that would tax the sure-footedness of a mountain goat.

"This up and down progress reminds me of a wild ride that I once had on a scenic railway at Coney Island," declared Elfreda Briggs as they finally halted for a rest. Elfreda's face was red from exertion and excitement, and her hair had become the plaything of the mountain breezes.

"Don't wolly till to-morrow," chuckled Stacy.

"Stacy, you're right," nodded Tom Gray. "But it is now time we were moving. See that ridge to the right of us?"

"Surely we do not have to cross that, do we?" begged Emma.

"Yes. We shall have to ride its entire length in order to reach the high mountain peak that you see still farther on. Either we must start now or wait until tomorrow," averred Tom.

"It never will do to be caught on the top of that ridge in the darkness," agreed Hippy.

The ridge referred to lay slightly higher than their present position, but there was plainly a safe trail leading to it. Orders to move were given by Hippy. The Overland Riders were quickly in their saddles, and the party slowly mounted the ridge, but halted as they came to the top of it. For once the girls experienced a case of "nerves."

"We never shall be able to ride over this awful trail," cried Elfreda Briggs.

"Oh, let's go back," begged Emma.

"Impossible!" answered Hippy. "This is the trail that we shall have to follow to reach the high peak of the Sierras."

"If the horses behave and no one loses her head we ought to be able to cross safely," averred Grace.

"My head is swimming already," moaned Nora.

"Why don't you turn it over and let it float for a few minutes?" suggested

Chunky.

After directing Woo to proceed on ahead, the journey was resumed, and the ponies stepped out over the knife-edge top of the ridge. This ridge, not more than a dozen feet wide along the top, formed a natural bridge connecting two mountain ranges. Here and there the sides of the ridge fell away sheer for hundreds of feet, and at others, smooth granite rocks sloped away to the canyon below.

Ahead of the Riders, Woo Smith was picking his way unconcernedly, singing blithely. The girls of the party sought to look equally unconcerned, but not with very much success, for each one was feeling the effect of the great height and their peril on the narrow path. Emma Dean finally slipped from her saddle, and passing the bridle-rein over one arm, proceeded to pick her way on foot.

"Cold feet, eh?" scoffed Stacy.

"No. I'm scared, that's all," replied Emma. "I don't care who knows it, either."

Grace glanced at the faces of her companions, and then, at the rapidly narrowing trail.

"While I believe that we shall be in less peril on our ponies than on foot, I suggest that we all walk," she said, dismounting. "With your feet on the ground you will be less nervous."

Grace's companions lost no time in following her example, but they dismounted cautiously. It was a relief to feel the solid ground under their feet. A laugh further relieved the strain when Hippy Wingate finally dismounted. The girls teased him unmercifully, though all knew that a man who had fought the Germans in the clouds was not likely to be disturbed by great heights. A few moments later Stacy dismounted, but Tom remained on his pony and appeared to be enjoying the novel experience of riding along this unusual aerial trail.

Miss Kitty, the lazy pack-horse, as usual, brought up the rear of the line and was dragging farther and farther behind. Her actions were observed with keen interest by the Overlanders, there being no certainty as to what the white pack mare might or might not do. She proved the wisdom of their lack of confidence in her when, weaving from side to side to avoid stepping over projecting rocks or boulders, she stepped off the trail with one hind foot.

"Quick, Hippy!" cried Nora excitedly. "She will fall over!"

Lieutenant Wingate sprang forward and gave the mare a quick slap on her flank. The mare jumped, then down she fell on her side with hindquarters hanging partly over the brink, and there she lay groaning dismally, the picture of misery and fear. The faces of the Overland girls paled, for each knew that the slightest struggle on the part of the white mare would send her sliding to the bottom of the canyon fully a thousand feet below.

CHAPTER XVI

GOING TO BED IN THE CLOUDS

“Oh, Hippy, you have done it this time!” cried Nora.

“Keep quiet! Don’t frighten her!” cried Grace, snatching the lariat from her saddle and handing it to Hippy. “Slip the loop over one of her hind legs, but for goodness sake do not make any sudden moves.”

“Wait! I’ll get a derrick,” shouted Stacy.

“Keep quiet!” commanded Tom sternly, at the same time taking a rope from the pommel of his own saddle and hurrying to Lieutenant Wingate’s assistance. While Grace, was patting the head of the fallen animal, trying to soothe her, Tom slipped the rope over her neck, Hippy having dropped the loop over one hind foot.

“Oh, Tom, you surely will choke Kitty to death if you pull on the neck rope,” warned Grace.

“Serve her right if I did,” growled Tom. “She is a perpetual nuisance. What next, Lieutenant?”

“We must haul her up, that’s all. Keep your rope taut, but don’t put too much strength on it,” directed Hippy, as he began to pull on the rope about the white mare’s hind leg. He failed to budge her.

“It is the pack,” said Elfreda. “Don’t you see that Kitty’s pack is pressing right against the rocks?”

“That’s right,” agreed Tom Gray. “We must unload the beast before we can do a thing with her. Confound her!”

“Now, Tom,” admonished Grace Harlowe.

“Stacy! Get that pack off and be careful about it too,” ordered Lieutenant Wingate.

Stacy could not manage the pack alone, so Grace and Elfreda assisted him in removing it. This undertaking, perilous as it was, was accomplished after more than two hours had been lost through Kitty’s clumsiness. It was then discovered that the white mare had gone lame, but Hippy found that she had suffered

nothing more serious than a bruised hip.

“We must be on our way,” he urged.

“As it is, we shall not get across this ridge before dark,” declared Elfreda, glancing at the lowering sun.

“Oh, don’t say that,” begged Nora. “We must.”

Tom Gray shook his head.

“To make haste would be dangerous,” he warned.

As soon as the white mare was again in proper shape the party started ahead, determined to get as far on their way as possible before night, but darkness was settling over the canyons on either side of them when Lieutenant Wingate finally called a halt.

“We must make camp while we can see to do so,” he directed.

“What, here?” cried Emma.

“It is the best we have,” answered Lieutenant Wingate in a doubtful tone.

The trail had been steadily narrowing as they proceeded, and ahead of them it appeared to be almost impassable, at least for horses. It was decided to stake the ponies down in single file, which the three men finally succeeded in doing to their satisfaction. It was not an ideal tethering place, but most of the animals were used to sleeping in ticklish places, and, in fact, if necessary could sleep standing up.

Packs were removed and stored in safe places, but Woo, who had been sent out to locate a spring, returned with the information that he could find none. This, however, did not disturb the Overlanders, for their bottles held sufficient water for supper and breakfast, provided they were economical in its use, so a small cook-fire was built, and in a few moments the kettle was singing merrily and the odors of coffee and venison were in the air, to the accompaniment of Woo Smith’s “Hi-lee, hi-lo.” It was an unusual supper for the Overland Riders, sitting there with their food served on an army blanket laid on the ground, with empty space and sombre canyons on either side of them now filled with inky blackness.

While they were eating, Woo gathered stems of bushes and piled them ready for making a larger fire to light up the camp after supper.

“I should like to know where we are going to sleep,” reminded Nora as they finished the meal.

Tom said he would make up their beds very shortly, whereat the Overlanders laughed, but with not much mirth in their voices.

“If you don’t make haste you won’t be able to find beds to make up,” averred Emma. “Don’t you see the fog rolling in? We shall soon be enveloped in it.”

“Fog!” Hippy laughed heartily. “Why, child, that isn’t fog—it is clouds. We

are above them, but I think they will rise and take us in. When it gets a little darker here, you will see a sight that will interest you.”

Hippy’s prediction was fulfilled. The moon rose full at about nine o’clock that evening, and exclamations of wonder were uttered by the girls of the party, as its beams lighted up the slowly moving clouds that now had risen almost level with the top of the ridge itself. Here and there sharp peaks thrust themselves through the cloud seas, which were dark and menacing to the eyes of the observers.

“How beautiful,” murmured Elfreda Briggs.

“It is indeed,” breathed Grace. “The scene reminds me of the one that we looked down upon when we were riding the Old Apache Trail, except that this is infinitely more beautiful. Hippy, does not this remind you of France, when you were flying above the clouds?”

“In a way, yes. Many is the time that I have gone to sleep on a cloud for a few seconds. Tom, what is our altitude here?” he asked, turning to his companion.

“According to my aneroid, about eight thousand feet.”

“We are surely getting up in the world,” chuckled Emma.

“Don’t congratulate yourself too soon, Miss Dean. We may be going the other way before morning,” reminded Stacy Brown. “What about starting a conflagration, Captain Gray?”

“Woo, stir up the campfire and let’s have some light and warmth,” directed Tom.

“Oh, it is too bad to destroy this wonderful view. If you build a fire we shan’t be able to see the full cloud effect,” protested Grace.

“You will,” answered Hippy. “We soon shall be enveloped in clouds, and we are going to feel the cold, too.”

There was a biting chill in the air already and, to the amazement of the campers, mosquitoes were numerous and very active.

Tom, after a survey of their surroundings, said he would make up the beds, and called to Woo to bring the pick-axe.

“Make up the beds with a pick?” exclaimed Emma.

“Yes. By the way, where do we sleep tonight?” asked Miss Briggs in a slightly worried tone.

“I will show you,” replied Tom, beginning to dig a trench in the thin layer of soil that covered the ridge.

“If you can transmigrate a real bed, I wish you would make it two so that I may have one,” called Stacy.

Tom made no reply, but, after digging the trench, he had the guide and Hippy place stones on either side of it as an added protection against rolling out of bed.

“Stacy, get in here and see if this hole fits your ample proportions,” directed

Tom.

Stacy hesitated.

“I don’t like to be buried so soon after supper,” he complained. “Is this some new game that you are trying to play on me?”

“Yes. It is a game to keep you from falling out of bed and making a mess of yourself,” replied Tom tersely.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE LAND OF PINK SNOWS

"I—I think I should prefer to sleep downstairs," stammered Stacy.

"If that is the way you feel, you have only to roll over and you will be downstairs for keeps," promised Lieutenant Wingate.

"All right, I'll sleep in the hole in the ground, but don't you dare throw dirt on me," warned Stacy, crawling into the trench and cautiously disposing of himself to see if his bed fitted. "This isn't even half a bed, Tom. How am I going to turn over?"

"Don't," laughed Grace.

"Yes, please do," urged Emma.

"Wow!" muttered Chunky sitting up and peering over the edge of his bed at the cloud-sea rolling slowly along just below the camp. "Wouldn't it be a terrible catastrophe if I were to be transmigrated out of bed?"

"That depends upon the point of view," suggested Emma.

The Overlanders were startled at this juncture by a shout from the Chinaman, accompanied by a series of bangs.

"Somebody knocked over the kitchen table!" cried Chunky.

"Me savvy piecee kettle go 'way," wailed Woo, who, in emptying out some dishes, had let them fall over the side of the ridge so that the utensils were then on their way to the bottom of the canyon, a thousand feet below.

"He has lost the kettle," groaned Nora. "At this rate we shall soon be without anything."

"Except our appetites," finished Chunky.

"What a tragedy," observed Emma.

"Don't worry till to-morrow," advised the guide. "Hi-lee, hi-lo!" Nothing could disturb the equanimity of Woo Smith for very long, and he immediately resumed his duties. The loss of a few utensils was not a thing to be greatly disturbed about—at least he so reasoned the matter out.

It was late in the evening when the Overlanders finally got into their trenches

and dropped off to sleep, but their sleep was brief. First, Stacy had a nightmare and set up such a howling that all hands awakened in alarm. The next disturbance came when a sudden mountain wind-storm sprang up. The Overlanders were aroused just in time to see their campfire lifted into the air and hurled out over the clouds in which the embers and sparks quickly disappeared.

“Oh, this is terrible! We shall surely be blown off the ridge,” cried Emma.

“Lie down in your trenches and let the blooming storm blow itself out!” shouted Hippy. “No wind-storm up here can harm you so long as you keep down.”

The girls of the party rather reluctantly lay down again, and found that, in that position, the wind barely touched them, and, from that time on, peace reigned in the Overland camp until morning. The morning, however, brought with it fresh troubles. Every member of the party awakened shivering. Stacy declared that his feet were frozen, which Emma asserted was a chronic condition with him.

The Overlanders dragged themselves from the trenches, shoulders hunched forward, hands thrust into their pockets, their faces blue and pinched. The limit of their endurance was reached, however, when the familiar voice of Woo Smith assailed their ears.

“Hi-lee, hi-lo! Don’t wolly till to-morrow,” sang the guide.

“Smith!” shouted Tom Gray.

“He—he thi—thi—thinks he’s a bird,” chattered Stacy. “I hope he tries to fly.”

“Smith, please cut out the singing and prepare hot coffee as quickly as possible,” directed Tom.

“Me savvy coffee. Me savvy nicee piecee day. You savvy nicee day?” bubbled the guide.

“Oh, let him have his way, Tom,” urged Grace laughingly. “We should be glad that we have such a cheerful guide.”

“Cheerful idiot!” muttered Tom.

“Yes, Woo. We savvy,” called Grace, smiling over at the grinning face of the Chinaman. “Please make haste with the breakfast, though. Girls, get up and look out over the wonderful scene before you, and I will guarantee that you will instantly forget your troubles.”

With shaded eyes, they looked and did, for the moment, forget their chilled condition. The peaks were now in the full glare of the morning sun, while down in the canyons day had not yet fully dawned, and the dim shadows there were gray with the morning mist.

Another day of hard riding was before them, but before starting out Tom and Hippy announced that they would try to find a trail up the mountain that loomed in the sky some distance beyond. Upon reaching the end of the ridge that formed

a natural bridge connecting two mountain ranges, Tom and Hippy came upon a sharp descent that led down into a broad, open valley, beyond which lay the mountain they were to climb.

"This looks promising," nodded Tom, as they jogged down into the valley.

"It is more than that; it is wonderful," cried Hippy as the two men found themselves in a field knee-deep with blue lupines that grew there in profusion. The odor of the flowers was almost overpowering. To the right and the left of the two explorers were bunches of tuft-grass, here and there groves of slender lodge-poles, and spindling pines and junipers. Tom and Hippy paused in admiring silence. It was more beautiful than anything that they had thought possible in this rugged country.

While they were hunting for a possible trail that would lead them up the mountain, Tom Gray declared that Nature had used this sweetly scented field for a dumping ground, after having completed the building of the mountain itself.

"Yes, and she protected her work mighty well when she erected that snow-capped peak," answered Hippy. "I know that there *must* be a way out of this place to reach that mountain," he added, getting up from a fall, very red of face, his jaw set stubbornly.

Despite their persistent efforts to find a trail out of the valley of the lupines, it was noon before they did discover a possible way out for their party. After marking it by tying a handkerchief to the bent-over top of a spindling pine, they started back to join their companions. The Overland party had some time since saddled and bridled their ponies and were ready to move when Tom and Hippy returned to them, and all were on their way soon after the arrival of the two men.

"You are going to see something that will gladden your heart, Brown Eyes," declared Hippy as they started on. It was late in the afternoon when they finally rode into the valley below. The blue lupines, the grass, the pines and the junipers there presented a scene that brought cries of delighted amazement from the Overland girls.

"Oh, look at the pink ice cream!" cried Emma, pointing to the towering mountain which they were to try to climb.

"Why, Tom, we didn't notice that coloring on the snow up there this morning," exclaimed Lieutenant Wingate. "It must be a cloud reflection." Tom Gray nodded and said that the pink shade probably would soon disappear.

"We must camp in the midst of these flowers," cried Grace Harlowe. "It is finer than any place we have yet seen in these mountains."

"I agree with you," answered Elfreda. "It gives me fresh courage to go on. Why, Grace, I feel as if I could vault a six-foot fence."

"Suppose you try to jump over the white mare," suggested Grace, laughingly.

“This high altitude has gone to my head, too.”

“No, thank you. I think that it might be best for a person of my years to keep her feet on the ground,” laughed Elfreda. “But the effect, as well as the view here, is wonderful. I do not believe there is anything like it anywhere else in the world.”

Camp was promptly made amid the flowers. Soon thereafter the clouds on the horizon rolled down behind the mountains as the sun sank out of sight, but as long as light remained on the mountain tops, the wonderful pink tint clung to the everlasting snows on the pinnacles, and the mosquitoes increased in numbers and ferociousness.

“The higher we go the worse they get,” complained Stacy Brown. “Isn’t it queer how that pink tint hangs on?”

“Say, girls,” bubbled Emma Dean, “what if it should prove to be ice cream in reality?”

“In that event I know someone who never would go home,” laughed Nora.

“Two someones,” reflected Stacy, with a far-away, longing look in his eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE “TOP OF THE WORLD”

The morning dawned with the sky a molten green and gold. The mountain peak and the high ridges were a beautiful pink, and below them lay the green and blue of the meadow like a velvet carpet.

“Wonderful!” breathed the girls in chorus.

“Could anything be more beautiful?” murmured Grace.

“This is worth all the hardships we have endured,” declared Elfreda.

The Overlanders continued to admire the scene until breakfast was ready. Immediately after the meal the journey was resumed, each one eager to reach the pink snows above that held so great a fascination for all. They came to the snow line late in the day. The ponies were left in charge of Woo Smith to remain until the party returned from the high peak of the Sierras, which was now their immediate objective.

Now that they were close to it, they discovered that the snow really was pink. No one seemed able to explain this mystery until Tom announced it as his opinion that the pink shade was due to a tiny bright red flower whose petals were found imbedded in the snow. Stacy scooped up a handful of snow and tasted it, and then made a wry face.

“It tastes like turpentine,” he declared.

The Overland Riders danced and capered about in the snow like school children, and tried to snowball each other, but found the snow so crumbly that it could not be rolled into balls. This they overcame by wetting handfuls of snow from their canteens, and then, ere they even thought of making camp, they had a merry snowballing battle thousands of feet above sea level. They battled until their breaths gave out in the rarefied air—threw snowballs at each other until almost exhausted.

“Never mind. Don’t worry till to-morrow,” comforted Stacy Brown.

With the coming of night a chill settled over the mountain, beside which the previous nights were almost sultry, and a damp, gray cloud hid the lower reaches

of the peaks like a great gray blanket. The Overlanders were glad that they were above rather than below that cloud, and they hugged their cook fire, though it was far from being a roaring one, for they did not have fuel to waste.

Tom Gray, who, before the evening was far advanced, went out to examine the strange twisted little trees that grew here and there, discovered that they were full of pitch. He said nothing to his companions, but, moving back a little distance from the camp, he tested one with a match. The trunk of the twisted tree flared instantly. He put out the blaze with snow and returned to camp.

“How would you folks like a real camp-fire?” he asked.

“There ain’t no such thing,” mocked Emma.

Grace gazed at her husband inquiringly, knowing quite well that Tom had some plan for a fire in mind.

“The easiest thing in the world, my dear friends,” chuckled Tom. “All that is needed to make a regular conflagration is the know-how.” Tom struck a match against the trunk of a small scrubby tree against which he was standing, and held the match close to the trunk until he felt the heat, then sprang away from it. The tree blazed up gloriously.

“I did it with my magic wand!” he cried, waving his arms dramatically.

Exclamations of wonder greeted the achievement, and the Overlanders gathered about the blaze, holding out their hands to catch some of the warmth.

“Me savvy nicee piecee fire,” observed Chunky solemnly.

“However did you do it, Tom?” wondered Nora.

“The tree is filled with pitch,” answered Tom Gray. “When we get ready to turn in we will light another one. I don’t suppose we shall get any warmth from it, but we can hear it crackle, which will be some comfort.”

That night the Overlanders made their beds under an overhanging rock where there was no snow, and were lulled to sleep by another of Tom Gray’s burning trees. They awakened in the morning again stiff with cold, but half an hour after sunrise they had fully recovered their spirits and were making preparations for the long hard hike ahead of them.

Each of the men carried a pack on his back, leaving the girls to carry such provisions as they thought would be needed. Even the rifles had been left behind with Woo, the mountain climbers carrying no arms but their revolvers. Ropes, an axe and a shovel were included in the equipment and they finally set out for what Elfreda Briggs characterized as “The Top of the World.”

The peak of the great mountain was reached late in the afternoon, with all hands well tired out. They found the summit of the peak strewn with huge granite slabs, from some of which the snow had been blown away in spots, forming little scooped-out cups in the pink mantle.

“Well, now that we have enjoyed this punk view, suppose we get down to some place where we can make camp and sleep,” suggested Stacy.

“This is where we are to sleep to-night,” answered Tom.

“What! Here?” gasped Stacy.

“Yes. Did we not come up here for that purpose?”

Stacy shivered, and glanced down over the glittering snow field, then shivered some more, but made no further comment.

“This will be the first time that I ever slept in a snow bank, and I trust it may be the last,” observed Emma resignedly. “Last night we found a nice dry spot for our beds, but up here—Br-r-r-r!”

“You will be as comfortable as though you were in your own bed at home,” promised Grace.

“I wish to goodness I had your imagination,” grumbled Chunky. “It must be beautiful to be able to dream things the way you do.”

No fuel for a fire had been brought along on this last leg of the climb above timber line, so supper was a cold meal. Everyone felt so miserable after supper that the Overlanders with one accord began preparing to roll up in their blankets for the night. Hippy had already dug trenches in the snow for the party to sleep in, so they might be out of the wind. The girls talked chatteringly of everything they could think of, to assist them in forgetting their misery, then crawled into their trenches and tightly rolled themselves up in their blankets.

“This is the first time I ever went to bed with my boots on,” complained Elfreda. “Should I live until morning I surely shall have something to brag about.”

“Why, girls, this is an ideal summer resort,” laughingly chided Grace.

The response was a chorus of dismal groans. For a few moments after that the Overlanders lay gazing up at the bright stars, then a gradual warmth overspread their shivering bodies, and one by one they dropped off to sleep, now nearly thirteen thousand feet above sea level.

CHAPTER XIX

BOWLING IN NATURE'S ALLEY

Contrary to expectations the Overland Riders slept soundly all through the night, but the moment they crawled from under their blankets in the morning, they began to shiver.

"Come on! Take a run with me," urged Tom.

"Please go away and let me die," moaned Emma.

"We must have exercise to start our blood circulating," reminded Hippy.

"I don't want exercise. I want something to warm me up on the inside," protested Stacy.

Grace and Elfreda, holding hands, were already dancing about in grotesque fashion, taking long draughts of air into their lungs, the color rising to their faces as the circulation of their blood responded to their lively movements.

"Never mind, folks," comforted Hippy. "If you will all take a lively sprint, then a snow-wash, I will give you something that will please you and fix you up in great shape."

"I shall be past all human help long before that," answered Emma.

"Why don't you transmigrate yourself to a warmer clime for an hour or so?" suggested Stacy.

Tom Gray nodded to Hippy, whereupon Lieutenant Wingate took from his pack a tiny alcohol stove, which he filled from a small bottle and lighted. Over the stove he placed a coffee pot full of white snow dug from underneath the crust where it was not tainted with what Stacy had been pleased to characterize as a "turpentine taste." As the snow melted in the coffee pot, more snow was added until there was sufficient for their use. The Overlanders, quickly discovering that something unusual was going on, ran to the coffee-maker.

"Wha—at's this?" demanded Elfreda.

"An alcohol stove—a hot cup of coffee for each in a few moments," chuckled Lieutenant Wingate.

"Hippy Wingate, did you have that last night?" demanded Emma.

“Yes.”

“And you let us suffer with cold and eat a coffeeless supper?” rebuked Nora Wingate.

“You lived through it. Why kick, now that you are about to have a warm drink?”

“We ought to throw you off the mountain,” declared Grace.

“Don’t do it till he gets the coffee ready,” urged Stacy.

“The reason that I did not use the alcohol kit last night was that I had only enough alcohol to burn the stove for one meal,” explained Hippy. “I knew that you would be in more urgent need of coffee in the morning than you were last night.”

“I withdraw my suggestion that we throw you over,” laughed Grace.

“Are you ready?” called Lieutenant Wingate. “The coffee is.”

“Are we ready? Just watch us,” cried Emma Dean.

Each had an individual cup, and Hippy passed lumps of sugar to them from his own kit. They had no milk, but there was no complaint, for the Overlanders were glad enough to get the coffee black. This, with some biscuit and cold venison, comprised the meal, but they declared unanimously that they had never had a more appetizing breakfast.

“I have decided,” announced Stacy finally, “not to be a party to the plan to throw Uncle Hip overboard—at least not to-day. Good-morning, Sun! Welcome to our happy home,” he added, bowing to the rising sun.

Tom called attention to two birds circling over them, which he said were jays looking for crumbs, whereupon the girls broke up pieces of hard tack and sprinkled them over the ground a few yards from the camp. The jays swooped down on the crumbs, chattering and scolding. Grace then suggested that, having reached the “top of the world,” they resume their journey and explore the lower ridges, taking the whole day for their return to camp. The first quarter of a mile down was a slide rather than a walk, but the Overlanders made merry over their frequent mishaps, finally reaching a long granite slope on the south side of the mountain where there was little snow. There, the sun’s rays blazed down all day long, and there many sparkling streams had their origin.

About them the ground was strewn with boulders from the size of a man’s head up to great spheres of flint-like stone, many as round and glistening as though they had been turned and polished by man.

“Oh, look at the beautiful lake!” cried Nora enthusiastically, pointing to a body of water in the valley far below them. “What is it?”

“It doesn’t appear on my map. I don’t know what it is,” answered Tom.

“Perhaps it is the Aerial Lake that we have been warned against,” suggested

Grace.

"I was thinking of that myself," nodded Tom. "There are trees growing in the lake, but what are those glistening objects farther out?"

"Rocks," replied Grace, after focusing her binoculars on the shining marks.

"I wonder if I can hit one of them," said Stacy, picking up a round stone which he sent rolling down the smooth granite slope. The stone shot over a broad, shelving rock, leaped far out into the air, then, after what seemed an interminable time, splashed into the lake. The Overlanders saw a tiny spurt of water as the stone struck the surface of the lake.

"Folks, I've got an idea. Greatest thing you ever heard of, too," cried Hippy.

"Throw it over the cliff," suggested Emma. "The very best possible use to which you can put your ideas."

"That is exactly what I am going to do, my dear Emma. Just watch my smoke."

The Overland Riders were puzzled to know what Hippy had in mind. First, he cut several tough lodge poles, then selecting a boulder half as high as himself, Hippy easily pried it from its resting place with a pole and started it down the slope. The boulder soon began to roll, gaining momentum with the seconds, striking fire as now and then it came into contact with sharp projections of rock.

The boulder finally hit the shelving slabs of granite at the edge of the cliff with a mighty crash and leaped out into the air. The party watched its projectile-like flight with fascinated gaze.

Then came the splash into the lake. The Overlanders did not hear the splash but they saw the water spurt up into the air like a miniature geyser, and fall in a silver shower over a wide area.

"Hurrah!" shouted Stacy, tossing his hat into the air.

Tom Gray was excited, and so were his companions. Stacy Brown was already prying at a boulder with a pole, while Hippy had run to another one and was digging an opening into which to insert his lever, using a flat stone for a fulcrum. Many of the boulders lay resting on the slope and thus were easily thrown out of balance.

"Wait!" cried Elfreda. "We will have a game of bowling."

"Yes, and the highest one that was ever played," exclaimed Grace.

"And I'll be Rip Van Winkle. Show me a soft place to lie down and sleep," cried Stacy.

"Where are the ninepins?" demanded Emma. "One cannot bowl without having something to bowl at."

"Use the trees down yonder in the lake," suggested Hippy. "The one who makes the first score will be free of camp duties for the next twenty-four hours."

“I won’t play,” declared Chunky. “I know you want to work some sharp game on me.”

“And the one who makes no score at all must do the work for all those who do make scores,” added Elfreda laughingly.

The fat boy sat down stubbornly.

“Go on with your game,” he said.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you want to play, Honey?” asked Nora.

“No. I’m going to be the umpire,” answered Stacy.

“As you please,” laughed Hippy. “You will have to do the chores anyway. Folks, I am going to try to hit the third tree to the left of that group of rocks near the middle of the lake. Now watch me.”

Hippy started a rock, which he had selected with great care. It boomed over the ledge, observed in breathless silence by the spectators, then hurtled far out over the lake, finally smashing into the blue waters, throwing spray high in the air.

“A miss!” shouted the Overlanders.

“He missed it by half a mile,” jeered the umpire. “Why don’t you change your sights? You are shooting over the mark.”

“It’s a Hit!”

Tom took the next try. He balanced his rock, after having pried it loose, and made it ready for the fall, and sent it crashing along on its way. As nearly as the eye could measure, Tom’s boulder fell some twenty rods to the right of the tree aimed at. Tom then made ready a boulder for Grace. She failed to hit the lake, and derisive howls greeted her effort. Elfreda and Nora did a little better than that. Both hit the lake, but nowhere near the mark they had aimed at.

Stacy got up slowly and yawned.

“You folks make me tired. You ought to go to night school and learn how to roll stones. Why, even our little transmigrating Emma could beat you sharps at throwing stones. Emma, will you roll if I fix a boulder for you?” questioned Stacy.

“Yes, if you promise not to play tricks on me.”

Stacy winked at Emma and nodded sideways to the others, as indicating that the trick was to be played on them, then snatching up his pole he ran to a boulder that he had some time since selected for his own.

After prying the rock into proper position, squinting and sighting and surveying the rock from all sides, he nodded to Emma and offered the pole to her.

“Take it easy. If you can’t move the rock I’ll lend you a hand,” whispered Stacy.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you are now about to witness one of Emma Dean’s most notable transmigration feats. Keep your eyes on the performer and you will see that she has nothing up her sleeve—nor under her hat,” announced Hippy Wingate.

“Tip it over!” commanded Stacy, throwing his weight on the pole with Emma. “Watch the two twin-trees down there, but look sharply or you won’t see them when they disappear from the face of the earth,” he warned, strolling back towards his companions.

Emma’s boulder, not being quite round, moved very slowly at first, and once it threatened to stop altogether and go no further, but finally, gaining new impetus, it started savagely on its way to the ledge, where it did a clumsy hop into the air, then dived for the lake.

“It is going to hit the lake!” cried Grace.

“What did you think we were trying to hit?” demanded Stacy. “If it is a hit—if little Emma makes a killing, I did it. If she misses, she did it.”

“It’s a hit!” yelled Lieutenant Wingate.

“You don’t say?” wondered Stacy, turning quickly, the most amazed member of the Overland party.

Cheers greeted the achievement as two trees standing side by side in the lake disappeared as if by magic. Stacy threw out his chest and paraded back and forth with folded arms, an expression of dignified superiority on his face.

“I don’t have to work for a whole week,” observed Stacy.

“Oh, yes you do,” answered Elfreda. “You know you weren’t in the game—you are only the umpire. Further, Emma won the roll, and will have a vacation until to-morrow afternoon.”

“There goes my Hippy’s roll!” cried Nora, and for the moment attention was centered on Lieutenant Wingate’s rolling boulder. It made a clean hit, knocking down a tree close to the water.

“The racket must be terrific down there,” said Grace. “Hippy, you surely raised a disturbance with that last shot.”

Tom tried once more and sent a boulder into the lake. The Overlanders plainly heard the impact, and could see a shower of broken rock being distributed over the surface of the lake.

Suddenly a new sound smote the ears of the Overland Riders, a familiar sound

that they had heard many times in France and on their journeys in their own land.

“What’s that?” demanded Stacy.

“That?” answered Hippy. “Why, that is a butterfly lullaby. You surely ought to know that sound by this time.”

“*Woo, woo, woo!*” was the sound that smote their ears again.

“Down, all of you! We’re under fire!” shouted Tom Gray.

CHAPTER XX

LEAD AND MYSTERY IN THE AIR

“Are—are we attacked?” wailed Emma Dean.

“Bullets are coming from somewhere, that is certain,” answered Hippy, raising his head from the ground on which he, as well as his companions, had thrown themselves at the first shot.

Following the last two shots, the reports of rifles were distinctly heard by each member of the party, and each pair of eyes was straining to locate the source of the shooting.

“Oh, it must be a mistake,” cried Emma.

“That doesn’t help us any,” replied Tom Gray. “But I do wish we had our rifles.”

“Don’t wolly till to-morrow,” advised Stacy.

Hippy raised himself to a sitting position and waved his handkerchief.

“Woo, woo, woo!—*Bang!*”

Hippy threw himself over backwards, his feet kicking up into the air, his attitude being so funny that the Overlanders laughed heartily. Their laughter, however, quickly subsided, when they recalled that the last shot had passed very close to them.

Tom Gray had been listening to the whistle of the bullets and to the reports that followed, and the result of his listening and looking was the conclusion that the shooters were getting the range, and that, undoubtedly, smokeless powder was being used.

“I don’t care whether they see me or not,” exclaimed Hippy, getting to his feet, but no sooner had he done so than a bullet whistled so close to him that, as he declared later, he felt the hot breath of it on his cheek.

“Did you see that?” he cried, throwing himself on the ground.

“No. I didn’t see it. I may have sharp eyes, but they aren’t sharp enough to see a bullet on the wing,” retorted Stacy.

“What I cannot understand is, why they are shooting at us,” wondered Elfreda.

“Perhaps they think we have been throwing stones at them,” suggested Emma.

“Rolling stones gather no moss,” interjected Stacy. “Possibly, however, our rolling stones came near gathering in some parties down in the valley, and they are retaliating by shooting at us.”

“Girls! Let’s get out of here,” cried Grace, springing up. “I am weary of hiding.”

“Get down!” shouted several voices.

Grace gave no heed to the command, nor to the bullet that sang over her head, but when one barely grazed her cheek, she decided that she was quite ready to join her companions on the ground again.

“Are we going to lie here all day and let those ruffians shoot at us?” demanded Emma.

“The only other alternative is to crawl away,” answered Tom.

“Crawl where?” questioned Grace.

“To that ridge to the right of us.”

“I’m blest if I do!” retorted Hippy, getting up and walking deliberately towards the rocks indicated by Tom Gray.

The others, with the exception of Stacy Brown, not to be outdone in courage by Lieutenant Wingate, got up and followed him, not hurriedly, but walking slowly, keeping some distance between them, and in this way finally reaching the ridge and safety. Several shots were fired at them on the way, but all went wide of the mark.

“Where is Stacy? Quick! Maybe he has been hit,” urged Nora almost hysterically.

Grace sprang back and peered around the corner of the rocks.

“Oh, girls! Look at him, will you?” she cried.

Leaning as far out from the rocks as they dared, the Overlanders discovered the missing Chunky. He was flat on the ground on his stomach, wriggling along in a fair imitation of a serpent.

“Get up and walk, you tenderfoot!” laughed Hippy. “What are you afraid of?”

“Nothing. I just happened to think how, when I was a baby, I used to creep to the pantry to pick up crumbs, so I thought I’d see if I had forgotten how,” answered Stacy.

“You are a fine hero, aren’t you?” observed Emma sarcastically, when Stacy, having finally reached the protection of the rocks, got up and brushed the dirt from his clothes.

“No. All the heroes are dead. I don’t want to be a hero. What’s the news from the front?”

“Impossible!” muttered Tom, laughing in spite of himself. Tom had been

pondering, wondering, trying to account satisfactorily to himself for this attempt on their lives.

“What do you make of it?” asked Elfreda, nodding at him.

“It may have been accidental,” he replied.

Grace shook her head.

“No, they were shooting at us,” declared Hippy.

“I have been wondering, thinking about what Mr. Giddings told us at the ‘Lazy J’ ranch,” said Miss Briggs. “You remember what he said about the mysterious Aerial Lake, don’t you?”

“It is my opinion that we have been bombarding that very same lake,” declared Grace. “That, however, does not explain the shots.”

“Perhaps not,” returned Elfreda, “but it does go a long way towards proving that there is something in what the foreman of the ‘Lazy J’ told us. I, for one, am in favor of giving that lake a wide berth.”

“No, no,” protested Hippy and Grace. “Let’s find out what the mystery is,” added Grace.

“I’ll stay back and watch the horses while you are gone,” offered Stacy.

“Back to camp for us, now. To-morrow we shall decide what is best to be done,” advised Tom.

Having reached the safe side of the mountain, the party took a direct course for their camp, which was located close to what they had named “Bear Mountain,” because its top strongly resembled an ambling bear. They found pretty rough going until they reached a point about a mile from the camp, and there Tom suggested that they move more cautiously, and not blunder into camp, not knowing what they might find there.

They had approached within sight of their camp when Hippy halted and beckoned his companions to him.

“What is it?” questioned Tom.

For answer, Hippy pointed to a jutting rock which they knew lay just back of the camp itself. There, outlined on the rock, was a figure. It did not require very keen eyes to recognize the figure, even at that distance.

“Woo! Thank goodness,” exclaimed Miss Briggs.

“I’ll give him a yell,” volunteered Stacy.

“No, no!” protested Grace. There was that in the attitude of the Chinaman that appealed to Grace’s bump of caution. “Wait until he sees us,” she counseled. “Trust Woo to shout, unless there be good reason why he should not.”

The party moved on cautiously, thus far well screened by foliage, but the instant they appeared in the open, the guide saw them and began excitedly waving his arms.

“Do you see?” nodded Grace.

“He does seem to be excited about something,” agreed Tom.

“If there is likely to be trouble, perhaps I had better fall back as sort of reserve,” suggested Stacy. “In case of trouble it is a wise plan to have reserves, you know.”

No one paid the slightest attention to Stacy’s suggestion, nor did they increase their pace, not wishing to show that they shared the excitement of the guide, though there was a suspicion in their minds as to the cause of that excitement.

As they drew nearer, Woo Smith clambered down from his perch and trotted out to meet them. His face expressed neither pleasure nor alarm.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Smith,” greeted Emma with dignity.

“Are the ponies all safe?” smiled Grace.

“Him velly good.”

“Then what are you stewing about?” blurted out Stacy Brown.

“Anything wrong, Smith?” asked Tom Gray anxiously.

“Les. Bang, bang!”

“You mean bing, bing, don’t you?” cut in Stacy.

“Me savvy bang, bang!” returned the guide.

“Oh, let it go at that,” urged Hippy. “It doesn’t make much difference either way, whether it is ‘bang, bang’ or ‘bing, bing’!”

“Me savvy boom, boom, too,” added Woo.

“No, no. You mean bang, bang!” insisted Chunky.

“For goodness sake, give the poor fellow a chance,” begged Elfreda laughingly. “You will get him so befuddled that he will not know what he means. Woo, what is the trouble? Have you seen strangers about?”

The guide’s queue bobbed vigorously, as he pointed to a ridge on the other side of the canyon.

“Me savvy man there. Me savvy boom, boom! Bang, bang!”

Grace’s face lighted up.

“We understand, Woo. You heard guns and you saw a man over there,” she nodded. “Did the man see you?”

The Chinaman shook his head.

“Do you think he discovered the camp?” asked Tom Gray.

Woo shook his head again.

“He heard the boom of our bowling game and the shots following. That seems quite clear, but there appears to be no reason why we should be excited about it,” said Lieutenant Wingate.

Grace said she did not agree with him.

“What the guide says, indicates to me that the stranger was not only seeking to

wing us, but that he was looking for our camp. Was that all you saw, Woo?"

"No. Me savvy woman."

"What's that?" demanded Hippy sharply.

The Overlanders' interest was aroused anew.

"Me savvy woman. Woman come close and peek. Woman see camp, then go 'way. Br-r-r! Big piecee woman make ugly face!"

"Discovered!" exclaimed Hippy Wingate dramatically.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FACE IN THE WATERS

“A woman!” breathed Miss Briggs.

“You must be mistaken,” differed Nora.

“What did she look like?” questioned Grace.

“Me savvy no good,” answered Woo with an emphasis that drew a laugh from the Overland Riders.

“How strange,” murmured Emma. “What could a woman be doing in this awful country?”

“Perhaps she lives here,” suggested Elfreda. “I should not be surprised at anything in the High Sierras.”

“Show me where she was when you saw her,” requested Tom Gray.

Woo led him to a huge boulder, about a hundred yards from the camp.

“Me savvy piecee woman peek ovel locks,” said the guide.

“A woman peeked over the rocks there. Is that it?” asked Elfreda, the entire party having followed Woo out to the scene of his discovery.

“Les.”

“What did she do then?” persisted Tom.

“Him go ’way plenty quick.”

Grace and Hippy hurried forward and began examining the ground, but found no trace, no footprints, nothing that would indicate that a person had been there.

“Woo, it is my opinion that you went to sleep and had nightmare,” declared Hippy laughingly. “No one has been here. See! She would have left footprints at least.”

“Piecee woman go ’way,” insisted Woo.

“Don’t wolly till to-morrow,” imitated Stacy Brown. “Woo, got anything loose about the house? I’ve been living on pink snow for so long that I feel like a snowbird in distress. Food is what my system demands.”

“A bird, did you say?” questioned Emma. “I agree with you that you are something of a bird, but not of the snowbird species.”

Grace was the only one of the party who believed that their guide really had seen a human being spying on the camp. The others, after some discussion, dismissed the matter from mind, and devoted their attention to the supper which Woo had prepared and served. A much more comfortable night was spent in this lower altitude, and, with the rising of the sun, the Overlanders prepared to resume their journey.

The party was still at a considerable elevation above the lake, which had sunk out of sight as if it had never existed, due to the fact that huge granite shelves intervened between them and the mysterious water. They judged that the lake must lie at an elevation of close to eight thousand feet above sea level.

"I smell something," exclaimed Hippy as they were dismounting for luncheon and a rest that day.

"So do I," agreed Stacy Brown. "Someone is baking bread and using salt yeast. Lead me to it, quick!"

"What you smell is a dead campfire," Tom Gray informed the fat boy. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, the fire has not been out long, either. Come on, folks, help me to find it. It may give us some information that we need."

By proceeding against the gentle breeze that was blowing they were enabled, after considerable searching about, to locate the dead campfire.

"Here it is!" cried Tom, scraping aside a cover of leaves and grass that had been spread over the ashes to hide the tell-tale evidence. "See! The embers have been kicked aside and water poured over them. It is the water poured on the fire that produces the strong odor that we smell."

"How long ago was that done, do you think?" asked Hippy.

"Several hours ago, I should say."

Hippy made a circuit of the camp site that they had come upon, and returning, announced that he had made a further discovery—the spot at which horses had been turned loose.

"There appears to have been four of them, though I cannot be positive about that," he said. "I merely saw the footprints of four animals as they started on their way northward."

"But suppose they are looking for us?" exclaimed Miss Briggs. "If they are headed north they are headed towards the place where we were fired upon, are they not?"

"Oh, don't worry," laughed Hippy. "They have a nice, long, rough journey ahead of them. We seem to have missed each other very cleverly. However, they may be nothing more than an exploring party, and we have been so stirred up over what we have heard of the High Country that every little thing takes on an importance that doesn't belong to it."

"I wish I could make a long speech like that and get away with it," observed Stacy admiringly.

"Young man, you say altogether too much as it is," retorted Tom Gray. "I think that perhaps it might be well for us to take an inventory of our surroundings, as well as of what lies immediately ahead of us, before we start out," he added.

Hippy volunteered to do a little scouting, and Grace said she would accompany him, as anything of that sort appealed to her, so they set out together, but soon separated and took different courses.

Grace first of all sought a high point from which she obtained a very good view of the surrounding country, but saw nothing of a disturbing nature. A deer stood outlined on a shelf of rock a few hundred feet above and to the south of her; a bear ambled across an open space, zigzagging his way down. Bears do not like to go straight down a hill or mountain-side. The fact that their front legs are shorter than the hind legs makes going straight down a steep incline difficult, so, unless pursued, they ordinarily follow the switchback principle, zigzagging along until they reach the bottom.

The Overland girl watched the ambling beast with interest until it finally disappeared. She had no doubt that it was descending to the valley in search of food, lured there, perhaps, by the scent of an abandoned camp. Except for these two animals, she was unable to discover any sign of life, nor was there a wisp of smoke within her vision that might indicate the presence of human beings.

While Grace was making a general observation of the landscape, Lieutenant Wingate was endeavoring to follow the trail of the unknown horsemen to determine, as definitely as possible, the direction that they had taken. Their trail, which he followed for nearly a mile, still continued towards the peak, and it was his belief that that was their destination, or at least some other near-by point where they might hope to meet up with the Overland party.

Hippy pondered over this, and found himself wondering what the motive of the horsemen might be. Still pondering, he began retracing his steps to meet Grace at a point decided upon before they started away on separate trails.

Lieutenant Wingate was cautiously making his way through a thick growth of bushes, watching his step and listening for the familiar whirring warning of a rattler, when a sudden interruption occurred, an interruption that caused Hippy to throw himself on the ground, and lie still.

The interruption was a bullet, a bullet that clipped his hat, nipping a piece out of the brim, and giving the Overlander a scare. At first he thought the shot might have been fired by one of his own party, and was about to call out a warning, but changed his mind and began wriggling away from the scene. He had, by this

time, forgotten all about the snake peril, his one burning desire being to get as far away from that locality as possible in the shortest possible time.

Hippy found it slow going, because he twisted and turned so much, following as crooked a trail as he could lay out for himself, for the purpose of confusing the author of that shot, should the fellow decide to follow him.

Suddenly Hippy thought of Grace. She, too, might be in peril. His first inclination was to get up and run to their rendezvous, but upon second thought he came to the conclusion that it would be wiser to make an effort to discover the one who had shot at him. With this in view, Lieutenant Wingate began making a detour with the intention of coming up behind the shooter, Hippy having a good general idea of the position occupied by the man at the time the shot was fired.

All his efforts came to naught. He had spent nearly an hour in stalking his man before he realized that he was wasting time.

While he was engaged in his quest Grace had sat listening. She had heard the shot, and reasoned that it had been fired from somewhere in Hippy's direction. There being no answering shot, however, she forced herself to believe that her companion had shot at a snake, and decided to proceed on to the place where they were to meet before returning to camp.

Grace took a different route to reach the spot, and this route took her near a swiftly moving stream of water that flowed down into the lake. The stream was wide where she came upon it, and to find a suitable fording place the Overland girl continued on further up-stream. Her way led her under an overhang of granite rocks several feet higher than her head. Beneath her was a pool, deeper than the stream below, and in the pool she saw fish darting. The pool seemed to be fairly alive with them.

Grace's mind instantly turned to what the foreman of the "Lazy J" ranch had said about the golden trout in the High Sierras.

"Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if I had discovered a pool of those live nuggets!" she cried, throwing herself down and gazing into the pool, on which the sunlight shone, mirroring her own face and the rocks behind her on its surface.

"They aren't golden trout at all; they are mountain trout, and oh, what beauties! I must tell Hippy and have him get a mess for us. I reckon that golden trout story is a myth. However, golden or speckled beauties, it is all the same to the Overlanders. A mess of fish is what they need. I—"

The Overland girl paused suddenly. The smile on the face she saw in the water faded and a catch interrupted her breath.

"Wha—at is it?" she gasped.

In the water, beside her own, another face was reflected. It was the face of a woman. At first, Grace believed that some trick of nature was showing her a double of her own face, distorted and unrecognizable, but she instantly realized that this could not be possible. The face that she was looking down into on the surface of the pool was as hideous a countenance as she had ever gazed upon, scarred, distorted and crowned by a head of matted hair that bristled at its top and hung in tangled skeins over the ears. The face was all that she could see.

For an instant the eyes of the girl and the woman above her seemed to meet on the face of the waters.

Grace whirled and sprang up, revolver in hand, for there was menace in the eyes that she had been looking into.

Quick as the Overland girl was, Grace Harlowe found herself gazing up at a barren shelf of rock, unoccupied, silent as a tomb, with not a sign of life to be seen, either there or anywhere about her.

It was inexplicable. A feeling of something akin to terror took possession of Grace Harlowe, then all at once, panic seized her, and, uttering a little cry, she fled on fleet foot back down the stream, unheeding where it might lead her, hoping and thinking only of getting away from that which had given her such a fright.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY OF AERIAL LAKE

Grace ran on until suddenly halted by a shout from Hippy Wingate.

"Whither away, my pretty maid?" cried Hippy.

"Oh! You gave me a start," answered Grace breathlessly. "I've had such a fright, Hippy. I have seen the most awful face that I ever looked upon."

"In the words of the guide, 'don't wolly till to-morrow.' What did it look like? Tell me about it."

Grace told him what had occurred and described as best she could the face that she had seen mirrored in the pool.

"That sounds like the woman Woo saw watching the camp," he nodded. "I think we ought to go back to camp and tell the folks what you have discovered."

"You mean it sounds like Woo's description of her," answered Grace laughingly.

"You know what I mean. Come on!"

The Overlanders listened breathlessly to Grace Harlowe's story of her experience, but no one had an explanation to offer. They asked her if she had gone up to the rock to see if anyone were hiding there, but Grace said she had not done so because she was too frightened.

"I've never lost my head before, but I surely did this time," she added, smiling in an embarrassed sort of way. "I found a pool full of mountain trout—no, not golden trout—and I would suggest that one of you men go out and see if you can't catch a mess. Trout would be relished by all, including even myself, scared as I am."

"Trout! Me for them," cried Hippy. "You come along, Tom, and perhaps, between us, we may be able to find the beautiful creature that gave Grace the first real scare of her life. I'm glad you have found something that frightens you," chuckled Hippy. "Me for the fish now."

Tom accompanied Lieutenant Wingate, leaving Stacy with the girls, and with instructions to stay in camp. The two men returned two hours later with a mess

of trout sufficient to last the party several days. Stacy was asked to assist in cleaning them, then the fish were broiled, and a delicious trout meal was enjoyed. Not since they started had they sat down to such dainty food.

The Overland Riders were on the trail early next morning. This trail eventually led them up the side of a mountain, over places where they were obliged to hitch ropes to the ponies to assist them over particularly troublesome spots, yet it was all great fun.

As the party went on, game become more plentiful. Quail scuttled away at their approach, with heads ducked low, and here and there a flash of brown and white told of a frightened deer fleeing to safety. No one ventured a shot. The party had sufficient provisions for present needs, and further, it was understood that, unless absolutely necessary, there was to be no shooting. Tom, however, killed a rattler that lay coiled on a shelf of granite buzzing away like an alarm clock, but that was the only exciting incident of the morning's ride. By noon they had worked their way up to an apparently impassable ridge. Tom went on ahead, soon returning with the welcome information that there appeared to be a break in the ridge about a mile to the south of them, and that he thought they could get through it.

The Overlanders made camp late that afternoon, and on the following morning, now thoroughly rested, they followed rough and rugged trails, surmounting difficulties almost as great as the worst they had met above timber line. Their reward came later in the morning when they discovered that they had unerringly followed the right course.

"There's the lake!" shouted Nora.

Before them, framed in a rim of black forest and rock, lay a lake of the deepest emerald green they had ever gazed upon. About the shore, and extending down to the water, white pebbles formed a mat for the picture.

"It is our Aerial Lake," declared Grace. "It is the same lake that we saw several days ago and that we bombarded with rocks." From somewhere in that vicinity the shots that had disturbed them undoubtedly had been fired. It was quite a large body of water, just how large they could not see, on account of a sharp bend in the lake, and intervening mountains.

"Aren't we going down to make camp now?" asked Elfreda Briggs.

"Yes, for I'm just dying to know what the secret, the great dark secret, of Aerial Lake really is," bubbled Emma.

"From all accounts it's a homely woman," laughed Nora.

"Oh, there are others," reminded Stacy.

"That was not a nice thing to say, Stacy," rebuked Grace, laughing in spite of her efforts to be stern. "It was decidedly ungracious."

“So are the kind I mean,” retorted Stacy. “Hark!”

A rifle shot echoed through the canyons, but, though ears were strained to catch the sound, no second shot was heard.

“I wonder at whom they are shooting this time?” muttered Tom. “We are again reminded that we are not the only persons in the High Sierras, so let us be cautious.”

“Watch your step, ladies and gentlemen,” warned Stacy as the party started on.

The Overlanders chose a camp site back among the trees a few rods from the shore of the lake. This site was not only well screened from observation, but afforded an excellent view of the lake as far as the bend. Camp was quickly made, after which Stacy and Hippy shouldered their rifles and started out to get acquainted with their surroundings, as the party intended to remain at the lake for several days. The two had gone but a short distance from camp ere the Overlanders heard Chunky utter a shout.

“I’ve found an ark,” he cried, pointing triumphantly to a dugout canoe that lay on the shore.

The dugout had been hewn from a solid log and bore indications of recent use. Stacy searched for a paddle but could not find one. While the Overlanders, who had hurried out to him, were discussing Stacy’s find, Hippy was nosing about on the beach, closely observing the ground. He found boot tracks there, but they did not appear to have been recently made, so he decided that some days had elapsed since anyone had been on that particular spot.

Stacy promptly forgot that he was out reconnoitering, and, cutting down a small tree with his hatchet, he proceeded to fashion a crude paddle from it. He then announced that he was going paddling. Tom said no, but Stacy said yes, whereupon Hippy read his nephew a sharp lecture on “respect to one’s elders.”

To all this, Stacy made no reply, as he considered that he would gain nothing were he to protest too strenuously.

“That’s all,” finished Hippy.

“Thanks, Uncle Hip. But if anything should happen to me, you’ll be sorry that you were so cruel.”

“Oh, take your old dugout and go on,” exclaimed Hippy. “If you drown, don’t blame me. If it were not that you are a good swimmer I shouldn’t trust you in that cranky craft.”

“That is very kind of your Uncle Hippy,” reminded Grace. “I hope you appreciate it.”

Stacy failed to answer. Still tinkering with the paddle, he watched his companions out of the corner of one eye, as they walked slowly back towards their camp. Lieutenant Wingate, rifle in the crook of one arm, continued on. An

hour and a half later, as Hippy was returning, he saw his nephew paddling slowly down the lake. Hippy waved his hat and “hoo-hooed,” to which Stacy paid no attention whatever.

“Better keep in close. The wind is coming up,” called Lieutenant Wingate.

Stacy Brown was still silent, and Hippy, chuckling to himself, went on to camp, where he told his companions of things he had discovered on his jaunt, none of which were of importance, except that he had found further evidence of the presence of human beings and horses.

At luncheon time, Stacy was still absent, but his absence excited no comment, because the boy was very fond of the water and probably in his enjoyment of it he had forgotten all about the passage of time. But when it came four o’clock in the afternoon and still no Stacy, someone suggested that they go out and look for him. Hippy was the one who went. He soon came running back, waving his hat to attract the attention of his companions.

“Something has happened to Stacy!” he shouted.

“What is it—what has become of him?” called Tom Gray.

“Stacy’s dugout is floating bottomside up on the lake, but he is nowhere in sight,” answered Lieutenant Wingate.

The Overlanders started at a run for the lake.

“There it is! I see it,” cried Emma.

“Oh, Hippy, can’t you do something?” begged Nora. “What is that floating out there?”

“It’s a log,” answered Hippy. Despite the fact that the whitecaps were rolling up the lake, this log remained in one position all the time, but no one of the Overland party observed that fact.

“I can swim out to the canoe. Who knows but that Stacy may be under it?” offered Grace.

“No, no,” protested the Overlanders in one voice.

“Grace, the water is icy cold. To swim out in that water would be the death of you. If anyone does it, either Hippy or myself will,” announced Tom. “Is that a hat I see floating there?”

“It’s Stacy’s hat,” cried Elfreda. “Oh, this is too bad. Cannot something be done?”

“There he goes! He will be drowned. Somebody stop him!” begged Emma as Lieutenant Wingate plunged into the lake and began beating his way towards the overturned canoe. Hippy had not even paused to remove any part of his clothing.

“Come back!” shouted Grace shrilly.

“Come back!” urged Tom. “Even if he is there you can’t help him now.”

“Don’t worry. I am all right,” came back Lieutenant Wingate’s voice,

sounding far away.

“Me savvy plenty cold watel,” piped Woo Smith, but no one gave heed to his words, and it is doubtful if any of the Overlanders even heard him.

“I don’t believe Stacy is drowned at all,” declared Emma. “You will laugh at me, but I have a thought message that he isn’t.”

“This is no time for nonsense, my dear,” rebuked Elfreda.

“It isn’t nonsense, it’s transmigration,” protested Emma.

About this time they observed that Hippy was close to the dugout, and all eyes were fixed anxiously on him. They saw him grasp the turned-over boat, then dive under it. Hippy was out of sight but a few moments when his head was seen bobbing up on the opposite side of the dugout.

The Overlanders shouted to him, but the wind was against them and Hippy did not even know that they were calling.

“Someone run to camp and fetch a bath towel,” urged Grace. “Never mind, I’ll go,” she added, starting away at a run for the camp. Grace was back ere Lieutenant Wingate reached the shore. Tom was there to meet him, and assisted Hippy, dripping, and blue of face and lips, to his feet.

“Here, Tom. Take the towel and give Hippy a brisk rub-down.”

“How—where?” gasped Tom.

“Anywhere. Go out in the bushes, do it anywhere, but for goodness sake don’t delay. What did you find?”

“Nothing—not a single thing to indicate anything,” answered Lieutenant Wingate dully.

“Please hurry! Don’t you see that Hippy has a chill, Tom?”

Tom Gray hustled his companion out of sight, then stripped him and gave him a brisk rubdown, so brisk in fact that Hippy finally begged him to stop.

“I shan’t have any skin left if you go one rub further,” he complained.

“Here is Hippy’s other suit,” called Nora. “How is he?”

“Skinned alive,” answered Hippy with a groan.

Tom ran out and snatched up the suit, which he immediately assisted Hippy to put on.

“Are you still chilly?” questioned Captain Gray after his companion had gotten fully into dry clothes.

“I should say not, after what you have done to me. I don’t care anything about my own condition. What I am half crazy about is Stacy. I don’t, for the life of me, understand how a fellow who can swim as well as he, *could* drown. Tom, help me out. What do you think I had better do?”

“Do? I think you have done enough—all that can be done. My advice is that we get back to camp. The girls have a good fire going, and my suggestion is that

you sit by the fire and dry out your shoes while we decide what we should do next.”

“I don’t suppose there *is* need for hurry. If he is drowned he’s drowned, and that’s all there is about it, and if he isn’t, he isn’t. Yes, we will go back.”

When Tom and Hippy emerged from Nature’s dressing room, Tom carrying his chum’s wet clothing, they found the Overland girls awaiting them a short distance away. Nora embraced Hippy and wept on his shoulder, and, as a matter of fact, the other three girls of the party had difficulty in keeping their own tears back.

“Oh, this is terrible!” moaned Nora.

Emma pulled herself together.

“I have a mental message that Stacy is all right, and that he will be back to-night,” comforted Miss Dean.

“False hopes, I am afraid,” answered Tom.

“Woo, how deep is that lake?”

Woo consulted the skies.

“No savvy. Mebby fish can tell.”

No more was said. It was a sober Overland party that slowly retraced its steps to the camp, but, as they stepped in among the trees and came in sight of the little camp, the Overlanders halted abruptly and gazed astounded.

On a blanket that he had spread out sat Stacy Brown, his clothing wrinkled and dirty. Before him stood two cans of beans, open, and a plate of trout, while both cheeks protruded unnaturally as Stacy gazed soulfully at his companions.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAIR OF THE BAD MEN

“Hulloa, folks!” greeted Stacy thickly.

“Stacy!” cried Nora, running to him and throwing impulsive arms about the neck of her nephew.

Lieutenant Wingate drew Nora away and stood gazing down sternly at the munching Chunky. No one said a word, except Woo Smith, who hummed his “Hi-lee, hi-lo!”

“Where have you been?” finally demanded Hippy sternly.

“I—I’ve been up there,” pointing to the side of the mountain, at the same time getting to his feet.

“Sit down! Now out with it. The whole story, sir!”

“I was mad with you. I—I—I thought it would be fun to fool you all. There wasn’t anybody in sight, so I tipped over and—”

“Accidentally?” interrupted Hippy.

“No. On purpose. Then I shoved the canoe out and threw my hat into the water, climbed up the side of the mountain and watched you all hunting for me,” chuckled Stacy. “You all had been so hard on me that I didn’t care if I never came back.”

“I don’t understand how you could stand it to stay away at meal time,” wondered Emma.

“Oh, that was all right. I had some biscuit, then I found some dried venison in a cache in a cave up there. Somebody had been there. It was fine food, I tell you, but all the time I kept my eyes on the camp. I didn’t think you would go away and leave me, but I wasn’t taking chances. It was lots of fun watching you folks searching for Stacy Brown’s body, and I laughed when I saw Uncle Hip swimming out to look under the canoe. Say, you can swim some, can’t you?”

Hippy bristled. Stacy’s last words were the crowning ones. Lieutenant Wingate nodded to Tom.

“Come, Stacy. We wish you to go down by the lake with us. Fetch your

paddle,” directed Hippy.

“Wha—at are you going to do?” stammered the boy.

“We three are going paddling, my beloved nephew,” answered Lieutenant Wingate.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” whispered Grace as the three were about to depart, Stacy going reluctantly, but not daring to offer further objections.

“Give me that paddle,” ordered Hippy when they had reached a point well out of sight of the camp. “Stacy Brown, you have done about the most unforgivable thing that a boy could do. You led us to believe that you had been drowned; you have caused us much mental anguish, and it is no more than right that we ‘transmigrate’ a little of it to you. Lie down on your stomach!”

“I don’t want to. Wha—at are you going to do?”

“I am going to paddle you, young man. Tom, how many do you think would be about right?”

“I should say that a paddle, one paddle, for each member of the Overland party would be about right,” suggested Tom Gray. “There are six of us.”

A moment more and Hippy Wingate was delivering the punishment, not too hard, but just enough so as to make his plump nephew writhe.

“Six! There!” announced Hippy.

“You forgot to give him one for Woo Smith,” suggested Tom.

“You’re right.” Hippy remedied the oversight at once. “Get up! You made me swim in the cold lake, so I think I will give you a dose of the same medicine. I’m going to throw you in the lake.”

“Oh, wow!” howled Chunky.

“No, no,” protested Tom Gray. “Don’t do that, Hippy. He might catch cold and be sick on our hands,” grinned Tom.

“I’ll be even with you for this, Uncle Hip,” threatened Stacy.

“He hasn’t had enough yet, Tom. Help me throw him in.”

“Yes, I have. I’ve had enough. I’ll never play such a trick on you again. It was a low-down trick to play. Next time I’ll do it in some other way, but if you let me alone I’ll let you alone.”

“Don’t make threats,” warned Lieutenant Wingate.

“I can tell you something you want to know, too. I know something that you don’t know,” answered Stacy.

“First you had better come back to camp and apologize to the girls,” suggested Tom.

Stacy went along, rather timidly at first; then, as the thought of what he had discovered occurred to him, he swelled out his chest and began to boast.

“Suppose you tell us what it is that you have discovered,” suggested Grace

after Tom had repeated to the girls what Stacy said.

“Yes. I’ll tell you. When I was trying to get where you folks wouldn’t see me, I dodged behind some bushes and discovered that I was right in front of an opening in the rocks. At first I thought it was a bear den. Then I stumbled against a big bear trap that closed with a crash, but it didn’t frighten me at all. You see I am not a bear.”

Emma said there might be a difference of opinion on that subject.

“I lighted a match and found a lantern, just like the train conductors use. I looked about and found myself in a cave. I found a lot of stuff there, including some boxes of crackers and venison, that was cached to keep it away from the bears if they got past the trap.”

The Overlanders were keenly interested. Elfreda asked what else he had found in the cave.

“Mostly things to eat and to eat with. I didn’t bother about much of anything else. I reckon maybe it was the bad men’s cave that I discovered. When it comes to making discoveries I don’t suppose there is a human being who can equal myself. The only thing that I can’t lay claim to having discovered is Emma Dean.”

“That is because your ideals and your instincts lack elevation,” retorted Emma.

Tom and Hippy glanced at each other and nodded. Both were of the same mind with reference to Stacy’s discovery. Perhaps there lay the real secret of the Aerial Lake.

“Let us go over and investigate,” suggested Tom.

“I’m with you,” agreed Hippy. “Stacy, you will please lead the way to this bandit retreat, or whatever it may be, but if you fool us again, it’s the lake for yours.”

All hands started for the cave, with Stacy Brown in the lead, full of importance. It was quite a rough climb to the scene of Stacy’s discovery, and the boy took the worst course he could find to reach it, which the others of the party suspected ere they had gone far on their way.

“Look out for bear traps!” warned Chunky. “You know I haven’t looked about much on the inside. There! Look at that, will you?” he demanded, parting the bushes and revealing a small dark opening in the rocks.

“You aren’t going into that hole, are you?” cried Emma.

“I went in, didn’t I?” returned Stacy. “I didn’t have a crowd of women with me, though.”

Hippy entered first, using his pocket lamp to light the way, followed by Stacy and Tom, then the others filed in, leaving Woo Smith on the outside to see that

they were not surprised by the former occupants of the place.

Once inside, the Overlanders found that the roof of the cave was high enough to permit them to stand erect, but beyond them the darkness was so deep that they could not see the end of the hole in the mountain.

“Br-r-r! I’m afraid,” cried Emma.

“That’s because you aren’t a man,” answered Stacy. “Hulloa! There’s some stuff that I didn’t see.”

“Pullman car blankets!” exclaimed Tom Gray. “This looks as if we had made a real discovery.”

“You mean I have,” corrected Stacy.

“Yes. It is plunder. No mistake about that,” agreed Lieutenant Wingate. “Stacy, did you look around farther back in the cave?”

“No. I didn’t have time.”

“I think you were afraid of the dark,” teased Elfreda.

“Stacy is afraid of nothing at all, you know, Elfreda,” reminded Grace laughingly, whereupon Stacy’s chest swelled perceptibly.

“I am not,” he made reply.

A systematic search of all parts of the cave failed to reveal anything of great value, but they decided that it might be wise to remove some of the blankets as proof of what they had found.

“I know something else, too,” spoke up Stacy Brown.

“Well?” demanded Hippy, eyeing Stacy suspiciously.

“The log is chained down.”

“What log?” questioned Grace quickly.

“That log out in the lake,” Stacy informed them. “It’s funny that you folks haven’t noticed that it has been in the same position ever since we got here. There’s something queer about that log, too. I observed it the first time I walked along the shore, but it didn’t make much of an impression on me at the moment, and—”

“I doubt if it would have done so if it had fallen on you,” interposed Emma.

“Thank you. One would hardly notice the log at all unless the lake were quite rough, which would enable you to see the full length of the log when it was in a trough. I examined the log when I was out in the canoe, and there’s something else about it that is queer.”

The Overlanders with one accord started for the shore to look at the log.

“It’s chained down,” shouted Stacy.

“I believe the boy is right,” exclaimed Elfreda Briggs.

“Where’s that dugout?” called Hippy.

“I reckon it has gone around the bend,” answered Emma.

“No. The wind is in the wrong direction,” answered Tom. “I see it! There it is, at the upper end. It has drifted sideways to the beach.”

“I am going to have a look at that log,” cried Hippy, starting at a run for the dugout. Tom and his companions followed.

“Stacy, get the paddle,” directed Tom.

The fat boy obeyed without protest, which was rather unusual for him.

“Me savvy plenty piecee fun,” chattered Woo as they ran.

“If I am a prophet, you will be savvying something besides fun before we have done with this affair,” observed Elfreda Briggs soberly. “This is only the beginning.”

Stacy arrived with the paddle about the time that Hippy and Tom reached the dugout. The two men turned the boat over and shoved it out.

“You girls remain on shore,” ordered Hippy. “The boat will not hold more and give us room to work. Stacy, you sit still. Don’t you dare rock the boat.”

The lake was still rough and Hippy found it hard work to handle the dugout, but after throwing off his coat and shifting his passengers to better balance the dugout, he made better headway, finally reaching the bobbing log.

“Stacy is right. The log is anchored,” exclaimed Tom. “What can that mean?”

“We are going to find out right smart, Captain,” answered Hippy. “Do you see? The thing is anchored with a chain about its middle, and from rings, bolted to the ends, ropes lead down into the lake. That must mean that something is at the other end of the ropes. Tom, you ballast the other end of the dugout while Stacy and I pull on the rope at this end. We will try not to upset you. For myself, I have had one ducking to-day and that is quite sufficient. Stacy has one coming to him. All right, Chunky, heave away.”

They hauled on the rope with all the strength they dared exert, for to pull with too strong a hand meant a ducking in the cold waters of the lake.

Something came slowly to the surface.

“Oh, fudge! It’s an anchor—it is a piece of iron,” grumbled Stacy.

“Yes, but it isn’t an anchor,” answered Hippy excitedly.

“Boys, you have pulled up an iron box. Can you get it aboard?” cried Tom.

On the box, in yellow letters, was the name of a well-known express company. The box was securely locked, and apparently the lock had not been tampered with.

“We’ve made a find!” cried Stacy.

“Loot of some sort,” agreed Tom. “That is a money chest, probably of the same sort that the Red Limited was carrying when the bandits attacked our train between Summit and Gardner. There is undoubtedly another one like it at my end of the log, but the question is what are we going to do with our find.”

“What are we going to do with it? Why, we’re going to open it, of course,” declared Stacy. “If there is loot in it, findin’s is keepin’s so far as Stacy Brown is concerned.”

Tom was of the opinion that they had no right to open the chest, but suggested that they take it and whatever else they might find, to a safe place and bury it, and then get word to the authorities.

“I believe you have the right thought,” nodded Hippy, after a moment’s reflection. “There can be no doubt that this is stolen property, not the least doubt in the world. Therefore we are not taking another man’s property—we are trying to save stolen property. Come, Stacy, let’s give it another haul, then try to lift it aboard.”

“If I don’t get any of the plunder, I don’t haul,” objected Chunky stubbornly.

“Pull! If you don’t I’ll throw you overboard,” threatened Hippy savagely.

“I’ll drop it if you do. I’ll—”

A bullet snipped the water not a dozen yards from the dugout, followed by the report of a rifle.

“You’re under fire! Look out!” shouted the voice of Grace Harlowe, shrill and piercing.

“Let ’em shoot!” retorted Hippy. “Tom, are you game to go through with it?”

“Yes.”

“*Bang, bang, bang!*” Three bullets hit the water close at hand, sending up little spurts of white spray. Another bullet went through the top of Stacy Brown’s hat.

“Wow!” howled Chunky. “You can get shot if you want to, but I don’t.”

“Buck up!” urged Lieutenant Wingate. “We’ll have the thing aboard in a moment.”

Another bullet sang past them, clipping a sliver from the side of the dugout. The sliver hit Stacy on his bare arm and drew blood.

“I’m hit! Good-night!” yelled Stacy, suddenly letting go of the rope and diving head first into the lake.

As Stacy let go of the rope and took his dive, the iron chest splashed and went to the bottom, causing the canoe to turn turtle. Lieutenant Wingate and Captain Gray were hurled into the icy waters of the Aerial Lake head first, with bullets spattering in the water all about them.

CHAPTER XXIV

MAKING A LAST STAND

“You poor fish!” roared Hippy as he came up sputtering.

Stacy was making for the shore at full speed, creating considerable disturbance in the water as he progressed. Tom Gray and Hippy, concluding that safety first was the motto for them, were hitting up a rapid gait. The bullets, however, did not cease falling about them. All at once reports of other rifles, apparently fired close at hand, reached the ears of the swimmers.

“The girls are shooting!” cried Tom.

The Overland girls had run to camp for their rifles, and with them were trying to search out the hidden mountain marksmen, trusting to drive the mountaineers off, or at least to check their fire until their three companions could reach shore.

Hippy and Tom were swimming for the shore in the direction of the mountain cave. Observing this, the Overland girls ran forward to meet them.

“Hurry! Oh, hurry!” shouted Nora in great distress.

“They can’t reach us with their bullets now,” answered Hippy. “We are protected by the overhang of the mountain on their side.”

“Hippy is right. They have stopped shooting,” announced Grace.

At this juncture Stacy Brown floundered ashore and ran dripping towards the cave.

“Here, here! Where are you going?” called Elfreda.

“Into my bomb-proof shelter; that’s where I’m going,” flung back Stacy.

“You had better hide,” reminded Elfreda.

“Where’s that boy?” cried Hippy as he, too, floundered ashore.

“Never mind Stacy now. We have other and more important matters on hand,” answered Grace. “Hurry, Tom. I have sent Woo up among the rocks to act as lookout while we consider what to do next.”

“This is a fine mess. Here I am drenched to the skin, shivering like a man with the ague, and a band of scoundrels trying to shoot me up. Hospitable country, I must say,” complained Tom Gray.

"It might be worse. You and Hippy had better go into the cave and change your clothes," suggested Grace.

"Change to what?"

"That's so. It might be imprudent for any of us to go to camp for fresh clothing."

"Come, girls, let's gather wood and build a fire," urged Miss Briggs. "We can build a small fire in the cave and let our men dry out in there and we will stand guard on the outside."

"Good! That is real headwork," agreed Tom. "Give me a handful of sticks and I'll start a fire if you will provide the matches. Mine are soaked."

Hippy had already started in search of Stacy Brown, but Stacy was not in sight. He had fled to the farther end of the cave, whence he was gazing apprehensively towards the opening.

"You may come out," offered Hippy. "I'm too wet to have my interview with you now. When I get dried out I'll have a friendly conversation with you. Come out!"

Stacy sidled out, watching Uncle Hip narrowly. Tom came in at this juncture, with an armful of twigs that the girls had gathered, and started a small fire.

"I don't want to be smoked out," complained Stacy.

"There is worse than that coming to you, young man," reminded Tom. "At present, however, we have other things to attend to. Strip and dry out."

"I don't want to dry out. I want to be soaked," retorted Stacy.

"Don't worry. You're going to be," warned Lieutenant Wingate.

"If it hadn't been for me you folks never would have discovered anything," Stacy declared, turning a reproachful gaze on his two companions.

"And if it hadn't been for you, I should not have been dumped into a lake of ice water twice in one day," returned Hippy. "Tom, what is your idea of this shooting?"

"We have interfered with someone's business, that's plain," replied Tom. "When we hauled up that box of plunder, or whatever it may be, they let go at us with their rifles. Nor is that the worst of it—we are in for more trouble, and I should not be at all surprised to see it break at any moment, I—"

"Tom!" cried Grace Harlowe with a rising inflection in her voice.

"Yes?"

"Woo is running towards the cave, waving his arms. I think he has discovered something."

Hippy nodded at Tom and began drawing on his wet clothing.

"May the girls go inside now?" called Grace.

"No! Keep out! We will be ready in a moment," answered Hippy.

A shot, followed by a howl from Woo Smith, caused the two men to redouble their efforts. Hippy finished dressing first and ran out, rifle in hand, just as the guide came running up.

“Me savvy touble. Plenty men come ’long.”

“How many?” interjected Tom.

“Sees.”

“Six, eh? We ought to be able to handle them,” answered Hippy.

“There probably are more than six. What shall we do?” questioned Grace.

“All hands get inside the cave. From there we can watch the lake, and at the same time be fairly well protected,” directed Hippy.

Acting upon a hail from Tom that he was ready, the Overlanders hastened into the cave, where Woo was questioned in detail as to what he had observed. Having obtained all the information that the guide had to give, Hippy and Tom crept out, and lay secreted in the bushes in front of the cave to guard against surprises.

They had been there but a short time when Lieutenant Wingate discovered a man on the rocks about a hundred yards to the right of them. At almost the same instant Tom Gray nudged his companion.

“Two men are over in our camp,” he whispered.

“Don’t shoot. Time enough for that. They don’t know where we are. They—” Hippy paused abruptly.

“They don’t, eh?” jeered Tom Gray as a bullet flattened itself on the rocks just above the opening into the cave. “Keep down in there!”

“I think they are merely trying to smoke us out,” answered Hippy calmly.

A scattering volley of bullets was fired at the cave opening as he spoke, but there was no response from the besieged Overland Riders. Elfreda called softly to know if the two men needed assistance, but both said all the assistance they needed just then was to be let alone.

“There go the ponies!” exclaimed Tom Gray.

When Hippy looked he saw three men leading the Overland saddle ponies into a defile in the mountains. Hippy threw up his rifle, but lowered it instantly.

“It won’t do any good to shoot. Then again I might hit a pony. What I want to do is to get a man. Sh-h-h-h!”

The man that Hippy had seen, but who had disappeared immediately afterward, he now discovered lying on a slab of rock up high enough to give him a fairly good view of the entrance to the cave.

“I see him. Don’t move. He is looking this way,” whispered Lieutenant Wingate.

After a few moments of cautious observation, the man on the rock crawled

back and disappeared.

The day was rapidly drawing to a close and the two Overland men began to feel considerable concern. There was little hope in their minds that they were going to get out of their present situation that night. Tom and Hippy discussed the situation, and considered the idea of creeping away in the night, but finally concluded that their greatest safety lay in keeping out of sight and awaiting developments.

"It is their move first," declared Tom. "And when they do start something we shall be on the job, though I am a little concerned about our ammunition. We have none to waste. It seems to me that there ought to be some in that cave, if the scoundrels are half as prudent as we think they are."

Hippy called softly to Nora, asking her to have a thorough search of the cave made to see if ammunition might not be found. Half an hour later Nora reported that they could find none.

"Then we shall have to get along with what we have," decided Tom Gray. "With what we have we ought to be able to give a pretty fair account of ourselves."

Night fell, with the lake and the mountainsides bathed in a flood of moonlight, for the moon was full and well up. The fire in the cave had long since been put out so that the besiegers might not smell the smoke, and, shortly after dark, the girls passed out a luncheon, taken from the stores of food that Stacy Brown had discovered on his first visit to the cave. Tom and Hippy were munching this eagerly, when Tom uttered a suppressed exclamation.

"Look yonder!" he whispered.

"It's the dugout!" breathed Hippy.

The dugout, with three men in it, was being rapidly paddled out into the lake, which was now quiet, a gleaming sheet of silver in the bright moonlight. The paddlers went straight to the log and began hauling up on the rope at one end.

"They are after the chests. What would you advise, Tom?" asked Hippy eagerly.

"We are going to shoot, that's what," answered Tom Gray, leveling his rifle. "I don't want to hit anyone, but I do want to give them a scare." Taking careful aim at the canoe, he fired—and missed. Tom shot again, and this time his bullet reached its mark—the dugout.

Hippy Wingate tried a shot and scored a hit the first time. The men in the dugout showed indications of panic.

"Let 'em have it hard," urged Tom, whereupon both men began shooting, but the shooting was not confined to their own rifles. From somewhere on the mountain-side other rifles spoke, and bullets spattered against the rocks that

stood out white in the moonlight, hard by the cave.

"They've located us!" cried Tom Gray. "Stacy, come out here, but creep out," he ordered.

The fat boy came wriggling out, rifle in hand.

"See if you can find the fellows who are shooting at us; then stir them up," directed Tom.

A few moments later, Chunky's rifle spoke. In the meantime Tom and Hippy had been shooting at the boat, taking their time, aiming with deliberation, until finally the fire became too hot for the men in the dugout, and they paddled rapidly shoreward to the other side of the lake. Soon after their arrival there they began to shoot at the cave-mouth. Hippy and Tom then turned their rifles in that direction, but with what result they were unable to determine.

Stacy shot slowly and steadily, without apparent nervousness, and the two men began to feel respect for the irrepressible Chunky. After a time the fire on both sides died down and silence settled over the scene. Finally, Grace suggested that she and Elfreda relieve the men of their watch, which, after reflection, was agreed to. After a vigil of some hours Grace called for Tom and pointed towards the lake, that was shining in the moonlight.

"Is not something moving out there?" she questioned.

"Yes. It is those scoundrels after the chests again. Call Hippy!"

After watching the shadowy shape of the dugout for some moments the two Overland men again opened fire, and once more the dugout was hurriedly paddled ashore.

No further disturbance occurred that night. The girls went to sleep, but Lieutenant Wingate and Captain Gray remained on duty from that time on. All of the following day was spent in the cave, not a shot being fired on either side. The Overlanders were of the opinion that their adversaries were keeping out of sight for the purpose of luring the party out into the open, so they remained where they were.

Another night came on, and at about ten o'clock the Overland Riders were treated to a deluge of rifle bullets, which was not returned, as the ammunition supply was now too low.

"Grace, have you taken an inventory of the food?" asked Tom, after the firing had died down.

"Yes. We have enough for present needs, but have you considered that we may be held here until either we starve or are shot? I, for one, am in favor of making our escape. Take my word for it, our besiegers will play some trick that will prove our undoing," declared Grace with strong conviction in her tone.

"We will stick it out another day," answered Lieutenant Wingate.

“And walk all the way back to Gardner,” finished Elfreda Briggs. “I am of the opinion that—”

“Hark!” warned Nora, holding up a hand for silence. A faint tapping sound was heard by all. It seemed to be somewhere over their heads, but no one was able to interpret the sound, and after a time it ceased.

“Something is doing. Get your rifles ready,” ordered Tom.

The words had no sooner left his lips than a heavy detonating explosion sent a shower of rock and dirt down over their heads. None of the pieces was large enough to injure the Overlanders, but the dust set them coughing and choking so that instinctively all crowded towards the cave entrance for air, and further, because of fear that the rocks above might cave in on them.

“That was dynamite!” exclaimed Tom Gray. “Either they are trying to bury us here or to drive us out.”

“And I am going out,” declared Lieutenant Wingate. “Tom, you stay here, but for goodness sake make the folks keep down. The first head I see I am going to shoot at. Give me some cartridges, each of you.”

Five minutes later Lieutenant Wingate was crawling out on his stomach as silently as an Indian. Once more he heard that familiar tapping on the rocks above the cave.

“The fiends!” he muttered. “I’ve got to get up to their level or go above them.” He decided to proceed to the left of the cave, then ascend and approach the rocks above it. This he succeeded in doing. About the time he came within sight of the rocks over the cave the ground was shaken by another explosion. In the bright moonlight, he saw three men running towards the scene.

Hippy threw up his rifle and fired. One of the three men plunged forward and rolled over the edge of the rocks, landing, as Lieutenant Wingate thought, near the entrance to the cave. The other two men instantly disappeared.

“One!” growled the Overland Rider, hurriedly removing himself from that particular locality. Reaching a point where he could look across the cave entrance, Hippy made a startling discovery. The second charge of dynamite had been fired close to the edge of the rocks overhanging the cave entrance, so that the falling rocks had blocked it entirely. Lieutenant Wingate now crawled to the entrance, not knowing what instant he might be the target for a bullet, and, placing his lips close to a crevice, called softly.

His hail was answered from within. To his great relief, he learned that none of his companions had been injured, but that they dared not try to remove the wreckage from the inside fearing they might bring down a mass of rocks. Hippy advised them to remain quiet until later when he would try to work his way in.

“Just now, I must keep a sharp lookout,” he added. Not another shot did he get

at their adversaries, however, but just after daylight a rattling fire sprang up. Listening attentively, Hippy concluded that two parties were engaged in the shooting—at it “hammer and tongs,” as he expressed it. A few minutes later he saw two men running for the lake—saw them leap into the dugout and paddle excitedly towards the anchored log. He waited until they began to haul in on the rope at one end of the log, and then opened fire. One bullet bowled a man over. The other man grabbed the paddle and struck out for the shore with all speed. He had nearly reached it when a burst of fire from among the trees near where the Overland camp was located knocked the man over. He fell over backwards in the dugout, which slowly drifted ashore.

A group of horsemen at this juncture rode out into the open, and an instant later a bullet whistled past Hippy’s head.

“Gee whiz!” exclaimed Lieutenant Wingate. “I reckon the whole community has it in for me. I’ve got to have a look at those people.” With that Hippy worked his way cautiously through the bushes until he got an unobstructed view of the newcomers. The Overland Rider gazed, and as he did so his under jaw sagged.

“Ye-o-o-o-w!” yelled Hippy, leaping to his feet.

A rifle bullet answered him, but he was down ere it reached him. Once more he sprang up and fired three quick shots straight up into the air, then went down again. This time there was an interval, then the welcome answer—three signal shots—was fired. Hippy got up and waved his hat. He had recognized one member of that party. That member was Sheriff Ford.

“Overland!” shouted Lieutenant Wingate upon getting to his feet.

Sheriff Ford did not recognize him at once, but the party of horsemen rode towards him with rifles at ready, Hippy standing out in the open with hands held up. Sheriff Ford then uttered a shout as he recognized the Overland Rider.

It was a happy meeting—for Hippy Wingate. It took but a moment for explanations. A posse, with two sheriffs, including Ford, and five husky citizens of Gardner, had come out in search of the bandits who had tried to rob the Red Limited, and who were supposed to have held up and robbed another treasure train a week earlier.

On their way to release the Overland party, Hippy confided to Sheriff Ford the discovery of the iron chests secured to the log in the lake.

“I suppose there is a reward for the recovery of the plunder, but if there is, you take it. We don’t want it,” said Hippy.

Sheriff Ford protested, but Hippy said the Overland Riders could not consider accepting a reward under any circumstances. Ford said that in such event, the reward would be shared by the members of the posse, and that, in fact, the reward offered by the express company was the principal motive for the posse

coming out to try to accomplish what the Pinkertons had thus far failed to do.

The Overlanders were, after considerable hard work, released from their imprisonment in the cave, and it was then that Ford told them of the fight with the bandits, who, he said, were all members of the Jones Boys' gang. Of ten bandits, the posse had killed or wounded four. They found two who had been wounded before the arrival of the posse, one of whom, Hippy believed, was the fellow he had shot on the shelf of rock, and took four prisoners, including Mother Jones, the mother of the leaders of the gang. Four bandits had succeeded in escaping.

"Mother Jones!" exclaimed the Overlanders.

As it later developed, it was Mother Jones whose face had so frightened Woo, and which Grace Harlowe had seen reflected in the pool. Mother Jones had done the shooting at the Overlanders, following the Overland party's discovery of the chests in the lake. It was Mother Jones who had fired at them when they were bombarding the lake with boulders.

No time was lost in getting the chests from the bottom of the lake, and none was more interested in the contents than were the original discoverers, the Overland Riders. The chests were found to contain something more than half a million dollars in gold and banknotes, but two other chests stolen from the same shipment never were found, though the lake was dragged from end to end. It was believed that the contents of the missing chests had been divided among the bandits and secreted somewhere in the mountains, but not a man of the Jones gang would admit this to be the fact.

The Overland ponies were found secreted in a mountain defile, and that night there was a jollification in camp, a real feast of venison and trout, songs and story-telling, even Woo Smith indulging in his familiar song, to which no one now objected. Stacy Brown overlooked no opportunity to call attention to the fact that he was the one who had discovered the treasure chests, discovered the log to which they were anchored, and said he supposed that the railroad or the express company owed him a hundred thousand dollars.

"How much do you want? Come now," urged Sheriff Ford.

"Want?" exclaimed Stacy. "I don't want anything from you, but I want these unfortunate Overland Riders to appreciate what I have done for them, and I want them to apologize to me for the abuse they heaped on me while I was seeking to transmute trouble from their doors."

Sheriff Ford laughed heartily at Stacy's remarks.

"For he's a jolly good fellow," began Nora Wingate, in which the Overland Riders joined whole-heartedly, even Emma Dean, for the moment, forgetting her feud with Stacy Brown to the extent of keeping time with her lips, Woo Smith

independently chattering his “Hi-lee, hi-lo!” shouts of laughter winding up the tribute to the fat boy’s hold on their affections.

The Overland Riders decided to accompany the sheriffs and their party to Gardner. Being well satisfied with their vacation they were now ready to go home. The prisoners and the treasure were taken along to Gardner, which was reached several days later. Then the Riders entrained for home after the most interesting journey they had ever taken. On their way east they elected the irrepressible Chunky to full membership in the Overland Riders, and he promised to accompany them on their next season’s ride.

The story of that ride will be found in a following volume entitled, “GRACE HARLOWE’S OVERLAND RIDERS IN THE YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK.” The mysterious loss of the Riders’ ponies, the raid of the grizzlies, the puzzling robbery at the Springs Hotel, a night of terror on Electric Mountain, the hold-up of the Cumberland coach, and the solving of the Yellowstone mystery, are among the many experiences that befell Grace Harlowe’s Riders on their never-to-be-forgotten journey through the great National Park.

THE END

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