

JACK
RANGER'S
GUN CLUB

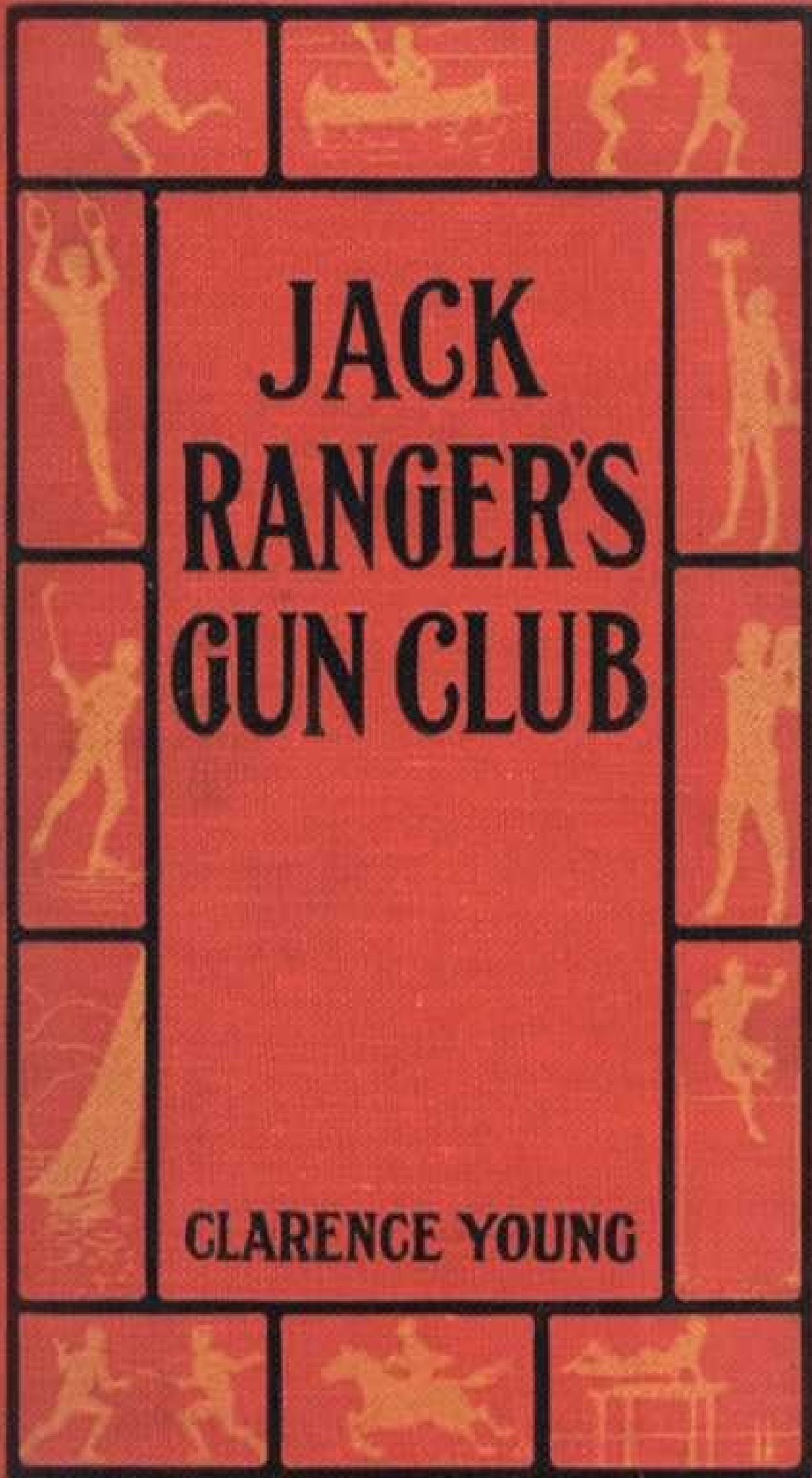


CLARENCE
YOUNG



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RANGER'S
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“THE BEAR CAME BOUNDING AFTER THEM!”

JACK RANGER'S GUN CLUB

Or

From Schoolroom to Camp and Trail

BY

CLARENCE YOUNG

AUTHOR OF "JACK RANGER'S SCHOOLDAYS," "JACK RANGER'S WESTERN TRIP," "JACK RANGER'S OCEAN CRUISE,"
"THE MOTOR BOYS," "THE MOTOR BOYS IN THE CLOUDS," ETC.

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JACK RANGER'S GUN CLUB

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JACK RANGER'S GUN CLUB

CHAPTER I

JACK WINS A RACE

“Now, then, are you all ready?”

“I’m as ready as I ever shall be,” answered Jack Ranger, in reply to the question from Sam Chalmers. “Let her go!”

“Wait a minute,” cried Dock Snaith. “I want to put a little more oil on my oarlocks.”

“Oh, you’re always fussing about something, Dock,” said Sam. “It looks as if you didn’t want to go into this race after all your boasting.”

“That’s what it does,” came from Nat Anderson.

“Hu! Think I can’t beat Jack Ranger?” replied Dock with a sneer as he began putting more oil on the oarlock sockets. “I could beat him rowing with one hand.”

“Get out!” cried Sam. “You’ve got a swelled head, Dock.”

“I have, eh?”

“Now are you ready?” asked Sam again, as he stepped forward and raised the pistol, ready to fire the starting shot in a small race between Jack Ranger, one of the best-liked students at Washington Hall, and Dock Snaith, a bullying sort of chap, but who, in spite of his rather mean ways, had some friends.

“I guess I’m all ready now,” replied Dock, as he got on the center of the seat and adjusted the oars.

“Better send for your secretary to make sure,” said Nat Anderson, and at this there was a laugh from the students who had gathered to see the contest. “Rusticating rowlocks, but you’re slow!”

“You mind your own business, Anderson,” came from the bully, “or I’ll make you.”

“It’ll take more than you to make me,” responded Nat boldly, for more than once he had come into conflict with Snaith and did not fear him.

“It will, eh? Well, if I can get out of this boat——”

“Aw, go on! Row if you’re going to!” exclaimed Sam. “Think I haven’t anything to do except stay here and start this race? You challenged Jack, now go ahead and beat him—if you can.”

“Yes, come on,” added Jack, a tall, good-looking, bronzed youth, who sat on the seat in the small boat, impatiently moving the oars slowly to and fro.

“Oh, I’ll beat you,” said the bully confidently. “You can give the word whenever you’re ready, Chalmers.”

“Ah! that’s awfully kind of you, really it is,” said Jack in a high, falsetto voice, which produced another laugh.

Dock Snaith scowled at Jack, but said nothing. There was a moment’s delay, while Sam looked down the course to see if all was clear on Rudmore Lake, where the contest was taking place.

“I’m going to fire!” cried Sam.

The two contestants gripped their oars a little more firmly, they leaned forward, ready to plunge them into the water and pull a heavy stroke at the sound of the pistol. Their eyes were bright with anticipation, and their muscles tense.

Crack! There was a puff of white smoke, a little sliver of flame, hardly noticeable in the bright October sunlight; then came a splash in the water as the broad blades were dipped in, and the race was on.

“Jack’s got the lead! Jack’s ahead!” cried the friends of our hero, as they ran along the shore of the lake.

“Dock is only tiring him out,” added the adherents of the school bully. “He’ll come in strong at the finish.”

“He will if he doesn’t tire out,” was Nat Anderson’s opinion. “Dock smokes too many cigarettes to be a good oarsman.”

“I suppose you think Ranger will have it all his own way?” spoke Pud Armstrong, a crony of Snaith.

“Not necessarily,” was Nat’s answer as he jogged along. “But I think he’s the better rower.”

“We’ll see,” sneered Pud.

“Yes, we’ll see,” admitted Nat.

The two contestants were now rowing steadily. They had a little over a mile to go to reach the Point, as it was called; that being the usual limit of impromptu racing events.

The contest between Jack Ranger and Dock Snaith was the result of an argument on oarsmanship, which had taken place in the school gym the night before. It was shortly after the opening of the term at Washington Hall, and in addition to football, which would soon be in full sway, there was rowing to occupy the attention of the students, for the lake, on the shores of which the academy was situated, was well adapted for aquatic sports.

The talk had turned on who were the best individual oarsmen in the school, and Jack Ranger’s friends lost no time in mentioning him as the champion, for more than once he had demonstrated that in a single shell, or a large, eight-oared one, he could pull a winning stroke.

Dock Snaith’s admirers were not slow in advocating his powers, and the bully, not at all backward to boast of his own abilities, had challenged Jack to a small race the next day. Jack had consented, and the contest was now under way.

“Jack’s going to walk right away from him,” said Dick Balmore, otherwise known as “Bony,” from the manner in which his inner skeleton was visible through his skin, and from a habit he had of cracking his knuckles.

“Don’t be too sure,” cautioned Sam. “Snaith has lots of muscle. Our only hope is that he won’t last. His wind isn’t very good, and Jack has set him a fast clip.”

“Go on, Dock,” cried Pud Armstrong. “Go on! You can do him easy!”

Dock nodded, the boats both being so close to shore that ordinary conversation could easily be heard.

“That’s the stuff, Jack!” cried Nat Anderson. “Keep it up!”

Jack had increased his stroke two or three more per minute, and Dock found it necessary to do likewise, in order not to get too far behind. He was letting his rival set the pace, and so far had been content merely to trail along, with the sharp bow of his frail craft lapping the stern of Jack’s a few feet.

“Dock’s holding back for the finish,” remarked Pud as he raced along, and in passing Nat he dug his elbow into the side of Jack’s chum.

“Well, if he is, that’s no reason why you should try to puncture my inner tubes,” expostulated Nat. “I’ll pitch you into the lake if you do that again.”

“Aw, you’re getting mad ’cause Jack’s going to lose,” sneered Pud.

“That’s what he is,” added Glen Forker, another crony of the bully.

“Am I? Just wait,” was all Nat answered as he rubbed his ribs. “Slithering side saddles! but you gave me a dig!”

The contestants were now rowing more rapidly, and the students on shore, who were following the race, had to increase their pace to keep up to them.

“Hit it up a little, Jack!” called Sam. “You’ve got him breathing hard.”

“He has—not! I’m—I’m all right,” answered Dock from his boat, and very foolishly, too, for he was getting winded, and he needed to save all his breath, and not waste it in talking. Besides, the halting manner in which he answered showed his condition. Sam noticed it at once.

“You’ve got him! You’ve got him, Jack!” he cried exultantly. “Go on! Row hard!”

“Say, that ain’t fair!” cried Pud Armstrong.

“What isn’t?” asked Sam.

“Telling Jack like that. Let him find out about Dock.”

“I guess I know what’s fair,” replied Sam with a withering look. “I’ll call all I want to, and don’t you interfere with me, or it won’t be healthy for you.”

Pud subsided. Sam Chalmers was the foremost authority, among the students, on everything connected with games and sports, for he played on the football eleven, on the nine, and was a general leader.

“You’d better hit it up a bit, Dock,” was Glen Forker’s advice to his crony, as he saw Jack’s lead increasing. “Beat him good and proper.”

“He’ll have to get up earlier in the morning if he wants to do that,” commented Bony Balmore, as he cracked his big knuckles in his excitement.

And it was high time for Dock to do some rowing. Jack had not been unaware of his rival’s difficulty, and deciding that the best way to win the race would be to make a spurt and tire him out before the finish, he “hit up a faster clip,” the broad blades of the oars dipping into the water, coming out and going in again with scarcely a ripple.

“There he goes! There he goes!” cried Sam. “That’s the ticket, Jack!”

“Go on! Go on!” yelled Nat.

“Get right after him, Dock,” advised Pud.

“You can beat him! Do it!” cried Glen.

But it was easier said than done. Jack was rowing his best, and when our hero did that it was “going some,” as Sam used to say. He had opened up quite a stretch of water between his boat and Dock’s, and the bully, with a quick glance over his shoulder, seeing this, resolved to close it up and then pass his rival. There was less than a quarter of a mile to the finish, and he must needs row hard if he was to win.

Dock bent to the task. He was a powerfully built lad, and had he been in good condition there is no question but what he could have beaten Jack. But cigarette-smoking, an occasional bottle of beer, late hours and too much rich food had made him fat, and anything but an ideal athlete.

Still he had plenty of “row” left in him yet, as he demonstrated a few seconds later, when by increasing not only the number of his strokes per minute, but also putting more power into them, he crept up on Jack, until he was even with him.

Jack rowed the same rate he had settled on to pull until he was within a short

distance of the finish. He was saving himself for a spurt.

Suddenly Dock's boat crept a little past Jack's.

"There he goes! There he goes!" cried Pud, capering about on the bank in delight. "What did I tell you?"

"He'll win easy," was Glen's opinion.

"It isn't over yet," remarked Nat quietly, but he glanced anxiously at Sam, who shook his head in a reassuring manner.

Dock began to increase his lead. Jack looked over his shoulder for one glance at his rival's boat. The two were now rowing well and swiftly.

"Go on, Jack! Go on! Go on!" begged Bony, cracking his eight fingers and two thumbs in rapid succession, like a battery of popguns. "Don't let him beat you!"

Dock was now a boat's length ahead, and rowing well, but a critical observer could notice that his breathing distressed him.

"Now's your chance, Jack!" yelled Sam.

But Jack did not need any one to tell him. Another glance over his shoulder at his rival showed him that the time had come to make the spurt. He leaned forward, took a firmer grip on the ash handles, and then gave such an exhibition of rowing as was seldom seen at Washington Hall.

Dock saw his enemy coming, and tried to stave off defeat, but it was no use. He was completely fagged out. Jack went right past him, "as if Dock was standing still," was the way Sam expressed it.

"Go on! Go on!" screamed Pud. "You've got to row, Dock!"

But Dock could not imitate the pace that Jack had set. He tried, but the effort was saddening. He splashed, and the oars all but slipped from his hands. His heart was fluttering like that of a wounded bird.

"You've got him! You've got him, Jack!" yelled Nat; and, sure enough, Jack Ranger had.

On and on he rowed, increasing every second the open water between his boat

and his rival's, until he shot past the Point, a winner by several lengths.

"That's the way to do it!"

"I knew he'd win!"

"Three cheers for Jack Ranger!"

These, and other cries of victory, greeted our hero's ears as he allowed his oars to rest on the water flat, while he recovered his wind after the heart-breaking finish.

"Well, Dock could beat him if he was in training," said Pud doggedly.

"That's what he could," echoed Glen.

"Not in a thousand years!" was Nat's positive assertion.

The boys crowded to the float that marked the finish of the course. Jack reached it first, and stepped out of his shell, being greeted by his friends. Then Dock rowed slowly up. His distress showed plainly in his puffy, white face.

He got out clumsily, and staggered as he clambered upon the float.

"Hard luck, old man," said Jack good-humoredly.

"I don't want your sympathy!" snapped Dock. "I'll row you again, and I'll beat you!"

Jack had held out his hand, but the bully ignored it. He turned aside, and whether the float tilted, or whether Snaith tottered because of a cramp in his leg, was never known, but he staggered for a moment, tried unsuccessfully to recover his balance, and then plunged into the lake at one of the deepest spots, right off the float.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW BOY

“There goes Dock!”

“Pull him out!”

“Yes, before he gets under the float!”

“He can’t swim! He’s too exhausted!”

These were some of the expressions the excited lads shouted as they surged forward to look at the spot where Dock had disappeared. A string of bubbles and some swirling eddies were all that marked the place.

The float began to tilt with the weight of so many boys on one edge.

“Stand back!” cried Jack Ranger. “Stand back, or we’ll all be in the lake!”

They heeded his words, and moved toward the middle of the platform.

“Some one ought to go in after him,” said Pud Armstrong, his teeth fairly chattering from fright and nervousness. “I—I can’t swim.”

“Look out!” cried Jack. “I’m going in!”

He began pulling off the sweater which some of the lads had helped put on him, when he stepped from the shell all perspiration.

He poised for an instant on the edge of the float, looking down into the dark waters, beneath which Dock had disappeared, and then dived in.

“Get one of the boats out. Maybe he won’t come up near the float,” ordered Sam Chalmers, and several lads hurriedly shoved out into the lake a broad barge, which could safely be used by Jack in getting Dock out of the water, if he was fortunate enough to find the youth.

“Queer he doesn’t come up,” spoke Glen in a whisper.

“Who—Dock or Jack?” asked Bony, cracking his finger knuckles in double relays.

“Dock.”

“He’s too exhausted,” replied Bony. “Can’t swim. But Jack’ll get him.”

How long it seemed since Jack had dived down! The swirl he made had subsided, and the water was almost calm again. Anxiously the lads on the float and shore watched to see him reappear. Would he come up alone, or would he bring Dock with him?

“Maybe Jack hit his head on something,” suggested Nat.

“Jack knows how to dive, and it’s deep here,” said Sam. “I guess he’ll come up all right, but——”

He did not finish the sentence. At that moment there was a disturbance beneath the surface of the lake. A head bobbed up.

“There’s Jack!” cried Bony delightedly.

A white arm shot up and began sweeping the water.

“He’s got him!” yelled Nat. “He’s got Dock!”

Sure enough, Jack had come to the surface, encircling in his left arm the unconscious form of Dock Snaith, while with his sturdy right he was swimming slowly toward the float.

“The boat! the boat! It’s nearer!” cried Sam, for Jack had come up at some distance from the little pier and closer to the rowboat which had put out from shore.

Jack heard and understood. Turning, he began swimming toward the craft, and the lads in it rowed toward him. A few seconds later Jack had clutched the gunwale, holding Dock’s head out of water.

Several eager hands reached down to grasp our hero.

“Take—take him first,” he said pantingly. “I’m—I’m all right.”

Dock was hauled into the boat.

“Now row ashore. I’ll swim it,” went on Jack. “Get the water out of him as soon as you can. He—he was right on the bottom. Struck—struck on the—on the float, I guess.”

“We’ll take you in,” cried Bob Movel.

“Sure! There’s lots of room,” added Fred Kaler.

“No. Get Dock on shore,” ordered Jack, and they obeyed.

Relieved of his burden, and having recovered his wind, Jack swam slowly to the float. The boat reached it some time ahead of him, and Dock was lifted out, while, under the direction of Sam Chalmers, the students administered first aid to the drowned.

Dock was turned over on his face, a roll of coats having been placed under his stomach to aid in forcing the water out of him. There was no need to remove his clothing, as he and Jack were clad only in rowing trunks and light shirts.

“Now turn him over on his back and hold out his tongue, fellows,” directed Sam, and this was done, the tongue being held by Nat Anderson, who used his handkerchief to prevent it slipping away. This was done so that it might not fall back into the throat and prevent Dock from breathing.

“Now work his arms! Over his head! Press up his diaphragm and start artificial respiration,” went on Sam, and under the ministrations of the lads, Dock soon began to breathe again.

He sighed, took in a long breath naturally, opened his eyes, and gasped feebly.

“He’s all right now,” said Sam in a relieved tone. “How do you feel, Dock?”

“All—right—I—guess. My head——”

He closed his eyes again. Sam passed his hand over the prostrate lad’s skull.

“He’s got a nasty cut there,” he said, as he felt of a big lump, “but I guess it’s not serious. We must get him up to the school.”

“Come on, let’s carry him,” suggested Nat.

“Never mind—here comes Hexter!” cried Bony.

As he spoke the chug-chugging of an automobile was heard, and a touring car came along the road down to the float. It was a machine kept at Washington Hall, and used by the teachers, and, occasionally, when Hexter, the chauffeur, would allow it, by the students.

“Dr. Mead sent me down to see what the matter was,” said Hexter as he stopped the car. “He saw a crowd on the float and thought something might have happened.”

“There has,” replied Sam. “Here, Hexter, help us get Dock into the car, and then throw on all the speed you’ve got, if you have to blow out a spark-plug.”

“Is he—is he dead?” asked Hexter quickly.

“No; only stunned. Lively, now!”

Hexter aided the boys in lifting Dock into the machine, and then he made speed to the school, where the injured lad was cared for by Dr. Henry Mead, the master of Washington Hall.

“Well, that was an exciting finish to the race,” remarked Jack as he walked up from the float to the shore, surrounded by some of his chums, after Dock had been taken away.

“He oughtn’t to try to row,” said Fred Kaler. “He hasn’t got the staying powers.”

“Well, he didn’t have to-day,” observed Jack; “but if he would only train, he’d make a good oarsman. He’s got lots of muscle. I hope he isn’t hurt much.”

“He’ll be all right in a few days,” was Nat’s opinion. “Say, Jack, but you’re shivering.”

“Yes, that water’s a little cooler than it was Fourth of July.”

“Here, put a couple of sweaters on,” went on Nat, and soon Jack was warmly wrapped up.

“Now run up and change your duds,” advised Bony, and Jack broke into a dog-trot, his friends trailing along behind him and discussing the race and the

accident.

While they are thus engaged I will take the opportunity to tell you a little something about Jack Ranger and his friends, so that you who have not previously read of him may feel better acquainted with our hero.

The first volume of this series was called “Jack Ranger’s Schooldays,” and in it there was related some of the fun Jack and his special friend, Nat Anderson, had in their native town of Denton. So exciting were some of their escapades that it was decided to send them off to boarding-school, and Washington Hall, sometimes called Lakeside Academy, from the fact that it was located on the shore of Lake Rudmore, was selected. There Jack made friends with most of the students, including some who have already been mentioned in this present tale. He incurred the enmity of a bully, Jerry Chowden, who, however, was not now at the academy, as you will presently learn.

Jack’s home was with three maiden aunts, the Misses Angelina, Josephine and Mary Stebbins, who took good care of him. In the first volume there was related something of a certain mystery concerning Jack’s father, Robert Ranger, and how he had to go into hiding in the West because of complications over a land deal.

In the second volume of the series, “Jack Ranger’s Western Trip,” was related what happened to Jack, Nat Anderson, and a half-breed Indian, John Smith, whose acquaintance Jack had made at Washington Hall, when they went West in search of Mr. Ranger.

They journeyed to a ranch, owned by Nat’s uncle, and they had many exciting times, not a few of which were caused by a certain faker, whose real name was Hemp Smith, but who assumed the title Marinello Booghoobally, and various other appellations as suited his fancy.

Mr. Ranger was located, but only after the boys had suffered many hardships and gone through not a few perils, and Jack was happy to be able to bring his father back East, there being no longer any reason for Mr. Ranger remaining in exile.

“Jack Ranger’s School Victories,” was the title of the third volume, and in that was told of Jack’s successes on track, gridiron and diamond. Hemp Smith and Jerry Chowden made trouble for him, but he bested them. He had plenty of fun,

for which two teachers at the school, Professor Socrat, an instructor in French, and Professor Garlach, a German authority, furnished an excuse.

But Jack's activities did not all center about the school. There was told in the fourth volume, "Jack Ranger's Ocean Cruise," what happened to him and his chums when they went camping one summer. Jack, Nat Anderson, Sam Chalmers, Bony Balmore, and an odd character, Budge Rankin, who chewed gum and ran his words together, went off to live in the woods, near the seacoast, for a few weeks.

There they fell in with a scoundrel named Jonas Lavine, who was aided in his plots by Jerry Chowden and Hemp Smith.

Jack and his chums stumbled upon a printing plant, maintained in a cave by Lavine and his confederates, where bogus bonds were made. Before they had time to inform the authorities Jack and Nat were captured by Lavine and sent to sea in a ship in charge of Captain Reeger, a tool of Lavine.

Jack learned that Captain Reeger wanted to be freed from the toils of Lavine, and our hero agreed to assist him, in return for which the captain said he would aid Jack.

Jack and Nat managed to get out of the cabin in which they were confined. As they were about to escape from the *Polly Ann* a terrible storm came up, and the ship was wrecked. But not before Jerry Chowden had boarded her, to help in keeping Jack and Nat captives.

They had many hardships, afloat on a raft in a fog, and saved Jerry Chowden from drowning. Finally they were rescued, and Lavine and his confederates were arrested, Captain Reeger being exonerated. Jerry Chowden fled to the West, fearing arrest should he remain in the East. Jack and his chums were reunited, and they again enjoyed life under the canvas, until it was time to resume their studies at Washington Hall, where the opening of this story finds them.

As Jack and his chums walked up the gravel path to the dormitories, where our hero intended to get into dry clothes, the group of youths chatting eagerly of the events which had just taken place passed a lad standing beneath a clump of trees. The latter, instead of coming to join the throng, turned away.

"Who's that?" asked Jack of Bony Balmore. "I don't remember to have seen him

before.”

“He’s a new boy,” replied Bony, cracking three finger knuckles in his absent-minded way.

“What’s his name?”

“Will Williams.”

“Looks like a nice sort of chap,” added Nat.

“But his face is sad,” said Jack slowly. “I wonder why he should be sad when he’s at such a jolly place as Washington Hall?”

“Maybe he’s lonesome,” suggested Fred Kaler.

“Give him a tune on your mouth-organ, and he’ll be more so,” spoke Bob Movel, but he took good care to get beyond the reach of Fred’s fist, at this insult to his musical abilities.

“Let’s make friends with him,” went on Jack. “Hey, Williams, come on over and get acquainted,” he called.

But the new boy, instead of answering, or turning to join the happy crowd of students, kept on walking away.

“That’s funny,” said Jack, with a puzzled look at his chums. “Fellows, there’s something wrong about that boy. I can tell by his face, and I’m going to find out what it is.”

“You’d better get dry first,” suggested Nat.

“I will, but later I’m going to make that lad’s acquaintance. He looks as if he needed a friend.”

CHAPTER III

A CURIOUS LAD

“There’s Hexter!” exclaimed Jack as he saw the chauffeur slowly running the automobile to the garage. “Hello, Hexter, is Snaith all right?”

“I think so,” replied the automobilist. “Dr. Mead says the hurt on his head doesn’t amount to much, and that he is suffering mostly from shock. He’ll be all right in a day or so.”

“That’s good,” said Jack. “I don’t want him to be laid up right after I won the race from him.”

The students began to disperse, Jack to remove his wet clothes, and the others to retire to their rooms to get ready for the summons to supper, which would soon sound.

“Why, Mr. Ranger!” exclaimed Socker, the janitor at Washington Hall, as he saw Jack entering the gymnasium, “you’re all wet.”

“Yes, it’s a trifle difficult to fall in the lake and keep dry, especially at this time of year,” went on Jack. “But I say, Socker, get me a couple of good, dry, heavy towels, will you? I want to take a rub-down.”

“I certainly will, Mr. Ranger. So you fell in the lake, eh?”

“No, I jumped in.”

“Jumped in? Why, that reminds me of what happened when I was fighting in the Battle of the Wilderness, in the Civil War. We were on the march, and we came to a little stream. The captain called for us to jump over, but——”

“Say, Socker, if it’s all the same to you will you chop that off there, and make it continued in our next? I’m cold, and I want to rub-down. Get me the towels, and then I’ll listen to that yarn. If there’s one kind of a story I like above all others, it’s about war. I want to hear what happened, but not now.”

“Do you really? Then I’ll tell you after you’ve rubbed down,” and Socker hurried off after the towels. He was always telling of what he called his war experiences, though there was very much doubt that he had ever been farther than a temporary camp. He repeated the same stories so often that the boys had become tired of them, and lost no chance to escape from his narratives.

“There you are, Mr. Ranger,” went on the janitor as he came back with the towels. “Now, as soon as you’re dry I’ll tell you that story about the Battle of the Wilderness.”

“You’ll not if I know it,” said Jack to himself, as he went in the room where the shower-baths were, to take a warm one. “I’ll sneak out the back way.”

Which he did, after his rub-down, leaving Socker sitting in the main room of the gym, waiting for him, and wondering why the lad did not come out to hear the war story.

Jack reached his room, little the worse for his experience at the lake. He possessed a fine appetite, which he was soon appeasing by vigorous attacks on the food in the dining-room.

“I say, Jack,” called Nat, “have you heard the latest?”

“What’s that? Has the clock struck?” inquired Jack, ready to have some joke sprung on him.

“No, but Fred Kaler has composed a song about the race and your rescue. He’s going to play it on the mouth-organ, and sing it at the same time to-night.”

“I am not, you big duffer!” cried Fred, throwing a generous crust of bread at Nat, but first taking good care to see that Martin, the monitor, was not looking.

“Sure he is,” insisted Nat.

“Tell him how it goes,” suggested Bony.

“It’s to the tune of ‘Who Put Tacks in Willie’s Shoes?’” went on Nat, “and the first verse is something like this——”

“Aw, cheese it, will you?” pleaded Fred, blushing, but Nat went on:

“You have heard about the glorious deeds
Of the brave knights of old,
But our Jack Ranger beats them all—
He jumped in waters cold
And rescued one whom he had beat
In a race that he had led,
And while he strove to find him,
Unto me these words he said:

“Chorus:

“‘Never fear, I will rescue you, Dock—
Around you my arms I will lock.
I will pull you right out of the hole in the lake,
And then upon shore I will you safely take.
For though you tried to beat me,
In a boat race, tried and true,
I came out ahead, Dock, so
Wait and I’ll rescue you!’”

“How’s that?” asked Nat, amid laughter.

“Punk!” cried one student.

“Put it on ice!” added another.

“Can it!”

“Cage it!”

“Put salt on its tail! It’s wild!”

“Put a new record in; that one scratches.”

These were some of the calls that greeted Nat’s rendition of what he said was Fred’s song.

“I never made that up!” cried the musical student. “I can make better verse than that.”

“Go on, give us the tune,” shouted Sam.

“That’s right—make him play,” came a score of calls.

“Order, young gentlemen, order!” suddenly interrupted the harsh voice of Martin, the monitor. “I shall be obliged to report you to Dr. Mead unless you are more quiet.”

“Send in Professors Socrat and Garlach,” advised Jack. “They can keep order.”

“That’s it, and we’ll get them to sing Fred’s song,” added Sam Chalmers.

“Ranger—Chalmers—silence!” ordered Martin, and not wishing to be sent to Dr. Mead’s office the two lively students, as well as their no less fun-loving companions, subsided.

Quiet finally reigned in the regions of Washington Hall, for the students had to retire to their rooms to study. There were mysterious whisperings here and there, however, and occasionally shadowy forms moved about the corridors, for, in spite of rules against it, the lads would visit each other in their rooms after hours. Several called on Jack to see how he felt after his experience. They found him and Nat Anderson busy looking over some gun catalogues.

“Going in for hunting?” asked Sam.

“Maybe,” replied Jack. “Say, there are some dandy rifles in this book, and they’re cheap, too. I’d like to get one.”

“So would I,” added Sam.

“And go hunting,” put in Bony, cracking his finger knuckles, as if firing off an air-rifle.

“It would be sport to organize a gun club, and do some hunting,” went on Jack. “Only I’d like to shoot bigger game than there is around here. Maybe we can _____”

“Hark, some one’s coming! It’s Martin,” said Fred Kaler in a whisper.

Jack’s hand shot out and quickly turned down the light. Then he bounded into bed, dressed as he was. Nat followed his example. It was well that they did so,

for a moment later there came a knock on their door, and the voice of Martin, the monitor, asked:

“Ranger, are you in bed?”

“Yes,” replied our hero.

“Anderson, are you in bed?”

“Yes, Martin.”

“Humph! I thought I heard voices in your room.”

Jack replied with a snore, and the monitor passed on.

“You fellows had better take a sneak,” whispered Jack, when Martin’s footsteps had died away. “He’s watching this room, and he may catch you.”

The outsiders thought this was good advice, and soon Nat and Jack were left alone.

“Did you mean that about a gun club?” asked Nat.

“Sure,” replied his chum, “but we’ll talk about it to-morrow. Better go to sleep. Martin will be sneaking around.”

Jack was up early the next morning, and went down to the lake for a row before breakfast. As he approached the float, where he kept his boat, he saw a student standing there.

“That looks like the new chap—Will Williams,” he mused. “I’ll ask him to go for a row.”

He approached the new lad, and was again struck by a peculiar look of sadness on his face.

“Good-morning,” said Jack pleasantly. “My name is Ranger. Wouldn’t you like to go for a row?”

Will Williams turned and looked at Jack for several seconds without speaking. He did not seem to have heard what was said.

“Perhaps he’s a trifle deaf,” thought Jack, and he asked again more loudly:

“Wouldn’t you like to go for a row?”

“I don’t row,” was the answer, rather snappily given.

“Well, I guess I can manage to row both of us,” was our hero’s reply.

“No, I’m not fond of the water.”

“Perhaps you like football or baseball better,” went on Jack, a little puzzled. “We have a good eleven.”

“I’m not allowed to play football.”

“Maybe you’d like to go for a walk,” persisted Jack, who had the kindest heart in the world, and who felt sorry for the lonely new boy. “I’ll show you around. I understand you just came.”

“Yes; I arrived yesterday morning.”

“Would you like to take a walk? I don’t know but what I’d just as soon do that as row.”

“No, I—I don’t care for walking.”

The lad turned aside and started away from the lake, without even so much as thanking Jack for his effort to make friends with him.

“Humph!” mused Jack as he got into his boat. “You certainly are a queer customer. Just like a snail, you go in your house and walk off with it. There’s something wrong about you, and I’m going to find out what it is. Don’t like rowing, don’t like walking, afraid of the water—you certainly are queer.”

CHAPTER IV

BULLY SNAITH

“Hello, Dock, I’m glad to see you out of the hospital,” remarked Jack one morning about a week later, when his boating rival was walking down the campus. “You had quite a time of it.”

“Yes,” admitted Snaith, “I got a nasty bump on the head. Say, Ranger, I haven’t had a chance to thank you for pulling me out. I’m much obliged to you.”

“Oh, that’s all right. Don’t mention it,” answered Jack. “If I hadn’t done it, some one else would.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. But say, I still think I can beat you rowing. Want to try it again?”

“I won’t mind, when you think you’re well enough.”

“Oh, I’ll be all right in a day or so.”

“Be careful. You don’t want to overdo yourself.”

“Oh, I’ll beat you next time. But I want to race for money. What do you say to twenty-five dollars as a side bet?”

“No, thanks, I don’t bet,” replied Jack quietly.

“Hu! Afraid of losing the money, I s’pose,” sneered Dock.

“No, but I don’t believe in betting on amateur sport.”

“Well, if you think you can beat me, why don’t you bet? It’s a chance to make twenty-five.”

“Because I don’t particularly need the money; and when I race I like to do it just for the fun that’s in it.”

“Aw, you’re no sport,” growled Snaith as he turned aside. “I thought you had

some spunk.”

“So I have, but I don’t bet,” replied Jack quickly. He felt angry at the bully, but did not want to get into a dispute with him.

“Hello, Dock,” called Pud Armstrong, as, walking along with Glen Forker, he caught sight of his crony. “How you feeling?”

“Fine, but I’d feel better if there weren’t so many Sunday-school kids at this institution. I thought this was a swell place, but it’s a regular kindergarten,” and he looked meaningly at Jack.

“What’s up?” asked Pud.

“Why, I wanted to make a little wager with Ranger about rowing him again, but he’s afraid.”

“It isn’t that, and you know it,” retorted our hero quickly, for he overheard what Snaith said. “And I don’t want you to go about circulating such a report, either, Dock Snaith.”

With flashing eyes and clenched fists Jack took a step toward the bully.

“Oh, well, I didn’t mean anything,” stammered Snaith. “You needn’t be so all-fired touchy!”

“I’m not, but I won’t stand for having that said about me. I’ll race you for fun, and you know it. Say the word.”

“Well—some other time, maybe,” muttered Snaith, as he strolled off with his two cronies.

It was that afternoon when Jack, with Nat Anderson, walking down a path that led to the lake, came upon a scene that made them stop, and which, later, was productive of unexpected results.

The two friends saw Dock Snaith, together with Pud Armstrong and Glen Forker, facing the new boy, Will Williams. They had him in a corner of a fence, near the lake, and from the high words that came to Jack and Nat, it indicated that a quarrel was in progress.

“What’s up?” asked Nat.

“Oh, it’s that bully, Snaith, making trouble for the freshman,” replied Jack. “Isn’t it queer he can’t live one day without being mean? Snaith, I’m speaking of. He’s a worthy successor to Jerry Chowden.”

“Well, you polished off Chowden; maybe you can do the same to Snaith.”

“There’s no question but what I can do it, if I get the chance. He’s just like Jerry was—always picking on the new boys, or some one smaller than he is.”

“Come on, let’s see what’s up.”

They did not have to go much closer to overhear what was being said by Snaith and his cronies on one side, and Will on the other.

“I say, you new kid, what’s your name?” asked the bully.

“Yes, speak up, and don’t mumble,” added Pud.

“My name is Williams,” replied the new lad. “I wish you would let me go.”

“Can’t just yet, sonny,” said Glen. “We are just making your acquaintance,” and he punched Will in the stomach, making him double up.

“Hold on, there,” cried Snaith. “I didn’t ask you to make a bow. Wait until you’re told,” and he shoved the lad’s head back.

“Now you stop that!” exclaimed Will with considerable spirit.

“What’s that! Hark to him talking back to us!” exclaimed Pud. “Now you’ll have to bow again,” and once more he punched the new boy.

“Please let me alone!” cried Will. “I haven’t done anything to you.”

“No, but you might,” spoke Snaith. “Have you been hazed yet?”

“Of course he hasn’t,” added Glen. “He came in late, and he hasn’t been initiated. I guess it’s time to do it.”

“Sure it is,” agreed the bully with a grin. “Let’s see—we’ll give him the water cure.”

“That’s it! Toss him in the lake and watch him swim out!” added Pud. “Come on, Glen, catch hold!”

“Oh, no! Please don’t!” begged Will.

“Aw, dry up! What you howling about?” asked Pud. “Every new boy has to be hazed, and you’re getting off easy. A bath will do you good. Let’s take him down to the float. It’s real deep there.”

“Oh, no! No! Please don’t! Anything but that!” begged Will. “I—I can’t swim.”

“Then it’s time you learned,” said Snaith with a brutal laugh. “Catch hold of his other leg, Pud.”

They quickly made a grab for the unfortunate lad, and, despite his struggles, carried him toward the lake. It was not an uncommon form of hazing, but it was usually done when a crowd was present, and the hazing committee always took care to find out that the candidates could swim. In addition, there were always lads ready to go to the rescue in case of accident. But this was entirely different.

“Oh, don’t! Please don’t!” begged Will. “I—I don’t want to go in the water. Do anything but that.”

“Listen to him cry!” mocked Glen. “Hasn’t he got a sweet voice?”

Nearer to the lake approached the three bullies and their victim, who was struggling to escape. He was pleading piteously.

“I can’t stand this,” murmured Jack. “Williams is afraid of water. He told me so. It’s probably a nervous dread, and if they throw him in he may go into a spasm and drown. They should do something else if they want to haze him.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Nat. He and his chum were hidden from the others by a clump of trees.

“I’m going to make Snaith stop!” said Jack determinedly as he strode forward with flashing eyes. “You wait here, Nat.”

CHAPTER V

A GERMAN-FRENCH ALLIANCE

“Oh, fellows, please let go! Don’t throw me in the lake! I—I can’t swim!”

It was Will’s final appeal.

“Well, it’s time you learned,” exclaimed Snaith with a laugh. “Come on now, boys, take it on the run!”

But at that moment Jack Ranger fairly leaped from behind the clump of trees where he and Nat Anderson stood, and running after the three mean lads who were carrying the struggling Will, our hero planted himself in front of them.

“Here—drop him!” he cried, barring their way.

Surprise at Jack’s sudden appearance, no less than at his words and bearing, brought the hazers to a stop.

“What—what’s that you said?” asked Snaith, as if disbelieving the evidence of his ears.

“I said to drop this, and let Williams go.”

“What for?” demanded Pud.

“For several reasons. He can’t swim, and he has a nervous dread of the water, as I happen to know. Besides, it’s too chilly to throw any one in the lake now.”

“Are those all your reasons?” asked Snaith with a sneer.

“No!” cried Jack. “If you want another, it’s because I tell you to stop!”

“S’posing we don’t?”

“Then I’ll make you.”

“Oh, you will, eh? Well, I guess we three can take care of you, all right, even if you are Jack Ranger.”

Snaith had a tight hold on Will's arm. The timid lad had been set down by his captors, but they still had hold of him.

"Please let me go," pleaded Williams.

"We will—after you've had your dip in the lake," said Glen.

"Yes, come on," added Snaith. "Get out of the way, Ranger, if you don't want to get bumped."

"You let Williams go!" demanded Jack, still barring the way.

"We'll not! Stand aside or I'll hit you!" snapped Snaith.

He and his cronies again picked Williams up, and were advancing with him toward the lake. Snaith had one hand free, and as he approached Jack, who had not moved, the bully struck out at him. The blow landed lightly on Jack's chest, but the next instant his fist shot out, catching Snaith under the ear, and the bully suddenly toppled over backward, measuring his length on the ground.

"JACK'S FIST SHOT OUT, CATCHING SNAITH UNDER THE EAR."

He was up again in a second, however, and spluttered out:

"Wha—what do you mean? I'll fix you for this! I'll make you pay for that, Jack Ranger!"

"Whenever you like," replied Jack coolly, as he stood waiting the attack.

"Come on, fellows, let's do him up!" cried Pud. "We're three to one, and I owe him something on my own account."

"Shall we let the freshman go?" asked Glen.

"Sure!" exclaimed Snaith. "We can catch him again. We'll do up Ranger now!"

The bully and his cronies advanced toward Jack. Will, hardly understanding that he was released, stood still, though Jack called to him:

"Better run, youngster. I can look out for myself."

"Oh, you can, eh?" sneered Snaith. "Well, I guess you'll have your hands full."

Come on, now, fellows! Give it to him!”

The three advanced with the intention of administering a sound drubbing to our hero, and it is more than likely that they would have succeeded, for Jack could not tackle three at once very well. But something happened.

This “something” was a lad who came bounding up from the rear, with a roar like a small, maddened bull, and then with a cry Nat Anderson flung himself on the back of Pud Armstrong.

“Flabgastered punching-bags!” he cried. “Three to one, eh? Well, I guess not! Acrimonious Abercrombie! But I’ll take a hand in this game!”

“Here! Quit that! Let me go! Stop! That’s no way to fight! Get off my back!” yelled the startled Pud.

“I’m not fighting yet,” said Nat coolly, as he skillfully locked his legs in those of Pud and sent him to the ground with a wrestler’s trick. “I’m only getting ready to wallop you!”

Snaith, who had rushed at Jack with raised fists, was met by another left-hander that again sent him to the ground. And then, to the surprise of the rescuers, no less than that of the would-be hazers, Will, who had seemed so timid in the hands of his captors, rushed at Glen Forker, and before that bully could get out of the way, had dealt him a blow on the chest.

“There!” cried Will. “I guess we’re three to three now!”

“Good for you, youngster!” cried Jack heartily. “You’ve got more spunk than I gave you credit for. Hit him again!”

“Now, Pud, if you’ll get up, you and I will have our innings,” announced Nat to the lad he had thrown. “Suffering snufflebugs! but I guess the game isn’t so one-sided now.”

But, though Pud got up, he evinced no desire to come to close quarters with Nat. Instead, he sneaked to one side, muttering:

“You wait—that’s all! You just wait!”

“Well, I’m a pretty good waiter. I used to work in a hash foundry and a beanery,”

said Nat with a smile.

Snaith, too, seemed to have had enough, for he sat on the ground rubbing a lump on his head, while as for Glen, he was in full retreat.

“I hope I didn’t hurt you, Snaith,” said Jack politely.

“Don’t you speak to me!” snarled the bully.

“All right,” said Jack. “I’ll not.”

“I’ll get square with you for this,” went on Snaith as he arose and began to retreat, followed by Pud. “You wait!”

“That’s what Pud said,” interjected Nat. “It’s getting tiresome.”

The two bullies hurried off in the direction taken by Glen, leaving Jack, Nat and Will masters of the field.

“I—I’m ever so much obliged to you,” said Will to Jack after a pause.

“That’s all right. Glad I happened along.”

“I—I don’t mind being hazed,” went on the timid lad. “I expected it, but I have a weak heart, and the doctor said a sudden shock would be bad for me. I’m very much afraid of water, and I can’t swim, or I wouldn’t have minded being thrown into the lake. I—I hope you don’t think I’m a coward.”

“Not a bit of it.”

“And I—I hope the fellows won’t make fun of me.”

“They won’t,” said Jack very positively, for, somehow, his heart went out to the queer lad. “If they do, just send them to me. As for Snaith and his crowd, I guess they won’t bother you after this. Say, but you went right up to Glen, all right.”

“I took boxing lessons—once,” went on Will timidly. “I’m not afraid in a fair fight.”

“Glad to hear it, but I fancy they’ll not bother you any more. Do you know Nat Anderson?” and Jack nodded at his chum.

“I’m glad to meet you,” spoke Will, holding out his hand.

“Same here,” responded Nat. “Unified uppercuts! but you went at Glen good and proper!”

“You mustn’t mind Nat’s queer expressions,” said Jack with a smile, as he saw Will looking in rather a puzzled way at Nat. “They were vaccinated in him, and he can’t get rid of them.”

“You get out!” exclaimed Jack’s chum.

“Going anywhere in particular?” asked Jack of Will, as he straightened out a cuff that had become disarranged in the scrimmage.

“No, I guess not.”

“Then come on and take a walk with us.”

The lad appeared to hesitate. Then he said slowly.

“No—no, thank you. I—I don’t believe I will. I think I’ll go back to my room.”

He turned aside and walked away.

Jack and Nat stared after him in silence.

“Well, he certainly is a queer case,” remarked Nat in a low voice. “I don’t know what to make of him.”

“I, either,” admitted Jack. “He showed some spunk when he went at Glen, but now it appears to have oozed away.”

The two chums continued their walk, discussing the recent happening.

“Do you know, I think something is about due to happen, fellows,” announced Fred Kaler that night, when he and some of Jack’s and Nat’s chums were in the latters’ room.

“Why, what’s up, you animated jewsharp?” asked Nat.

“I don’t know, but it’s been so quiet in the sacred precincts of our school lately that it’s about time for something to arrive. Do you know that Socrat and

Garlach haven't spoken to each other this term yet?"

"What's the trouble now?" asked Jack, for the French and German teachers, with the characteristics of their race, were generally at swords' points for some reason or other.

"Why, you know their classrooms are next to each other, and one day, the first week of the term, Professor Socrat, in giving the French lesson, touched on history, and gave an instance of where frog-eaters with a small army had downed the troops from der Vaterland. He spoke so loud that Professor Garlach heard him, his German blood boiled over, and since then neither has spoken to the other."

"Well, that often happens," remarked Nat.

"Sure," added Bony Balmore, cracking his finger knuckles by way of practice.

"Yes," admitted Fred, as he took out his mouth-organ, preparatory to rendering a tune, "but this time it has lasted longer than usual, and it's about time something was done about it."

Fred began softly to play "On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away."

"Cheese it," advised Nat. "Martin will hear."

"He's gone to the village on an errand for the doctor," said Fred as he continued to play. Then he stopped long enough to remark: "I'd like to hear from our fellow member, Jack Ranger."

"That's it," exclaimed Sam Chalmers. "I wonder Jack hasn't suggested something before this."

"Say!" exclaimed Jack, "have I got to do everything around this school? Why don't some of the rest of you think up something? I haven't any monopoly."

"No, but you've got the nerve," said Bony. "Say, Jack, can't you think of some scheme for getting Garlach and Socrat to speak? Once they are on talking terms we can have some fun."

Jack seemed lost in thought. Then he began to pace the room.

“Our noble leader has his thinking apparatus in working order,” announced Nat.

“Hum!” mused Jack. “You say the trouble occurred over something in history, eh?”

“Sure,” replied Fred.

“Then I guess I’ve got it!” cried Jack. “Wait a minute, now, until I work out all the details.”

He sat down to the table, took out pencil and paper, and began to write. The others watched him interestedly.

“Here we are!” Jack cried at length. “Now to carry out the scheme and bring about a German-French alliance!”

“What are you going to do?” asked Nat.

“Here are two notes,” said Jack, holding aloft two envelopes.

“We’ll take your word for it,” remarked Bob Movel.

“One is addressed to Professor Garlach,” went on Jack, “and in it he is advised that if he proceeds in the proper manner he can obtain information of a certain incident in history, not generally known, but in which is related how Frederic II, with a small squad of Germans, put a whole army of French to flight. It is even more wonderful than the incident which Professor Socrat related to his class, and if he speaks loudly enough in the classroom, Professor Socrat can’t help but hear it.”

“What are you going to do with the note?” asked Fred.

“Send it to Garlach.”

“And then?”

“Ah, yes—then,” said Jack. “Well, what will happen next will surprise some folks, I think. The information which Garlach will be sure to want to obtain can only be had by going to a certain hollow tree, on the shore of the lake, and he must go there just at midnight.”

“Well?” asked Dick Balmore as Jack paused, while the silence in the room was

broken by Bony's performance on his finger battery.

"Well," repeated Jack, "what happens then will be continued in our next, as the novelists say. Now come on and help me fix it up," and he motioned for his chums to draw more closely around the table, while he imparted something to them in guarded whispers.

CHAPTER VI

A SNOWSTORM

Professor Garlach received the next day a neatly-written note. It was thrust under the door of his private apartment, just as he was getting ready to go to breakfast.

“Ach! Dis is a letter,” he said, carefully looking at the envelope, as if there was some doubt of it. “I vunder who can haf sent it to me?”

He turned it over several times, but seeing no way of learning what he wished to know save by opening the epistle, he did so.

“Vot is dis?” he murmured as he read. “Ha! dot is der best news vot I haf heard in a long time. Ach! now I gets me efen mid dot wienerwurst of a Socrat! I vill vanquishes him!”

This is what the German professor read:

“I am a lover of the Fatherland, and I understand that an insult has been offered her glory by a Frenchman who is a professor in the same school where you teach. I understand that he said a small body of the despised French beat a large army of Germans. This is not true, but I am in a position to prove the contrary, namely, that in the Hanoverian or Seven Years’ War, in 1756, a small troop of Germans, under Frederic II, defeated a large army of the French. The incident is little known in history, but I have all the facts at hand, and I will give them to you.

“The information is secret, and I cannot reveal to you my name, or I might get into trouble with the German war authorities, so I will have to ask you to proceed cautiously. I will deposit the proofs of what I say in the hollow of the old oak tree that stands near the shore of the lake, not far from the school. If you will go there at midnight to-night, you may take the papers away and demonstrate to your classes that the Germans are always the superiors of the French in war. I must beg of you to say nothing about this to any one. Proceed in secret, and you will be able to refute the base charges made against our countrymen by a base Frenchman. Do not fail. Be at the

old tree at midnight. For obvious reasons I sign myself only

“BISMARK.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Professor Garlach. “I vill do as you direct. T’anks, mine unknown frient! T’anks! Now vill I make to der utmost confusionability dot frog-eater of a Socrat! Ha! ve shall see. I vill be on der spot at midnight!”

All that day there might have been noticed that there was a subdued excitement hovering about Professor Garlach. Jack and his chums observing it, smiled.

“He’s taken the bait, hook and sinker,” said Jack.

When the class in history was called before him to recite, Professor Garlach remarked:

“Young gentlemen, I shall have some surprising informations to impart by you to-morrow. I am about to come into possession of some remarkable facts, but I cannot reveal dem to you now. But I vill say dot dey vill simply astonishment to you make alretty yet. You are dismissed.”

He had spoken quite loudly, and Professor Socrat, in the next room, hearing him, smiled.

“Ah,” murmured the Frenchman, “so my unknown friend, who was so kind as to write zis note, did not deceive me. Sacre! But I will bring his plans to nottingness! Ah, beware, Professor Garlach—pig-dog zat you are! I will foil you. But let me read ze note once more.”

Alone in the classroom, he took from his pocket a letter. It looked just like the one professor Garlach had received that morning.

“Ha, yes. I am not mistake! I will be at ze old oak tree on ze shore of ze lake at midnight by ze clock. And I will catch in ze act Professor Garlach when he make ze attempt to blow up zat sacred tree. Zat tree under which La Fayette once slept. Queer zat I did not know it before. Ha! I will drape ze flag of France on ze beloved branches. Ah! my beloved country!”

For this is the note which Professor Socrat received:

“DEAR PROFESSOR: This is written by a true friend of France, who is not at

liberty to reveal his name. I have information to the effect that the old oak tree which stands on the shore of the lake is a landmark in history. Under it, during the American war of independence, the immortal Washington and La Fayette once slept before a great battle, when their tents had not arrived. The tree should be honored by all Frenchmen, as well as by all Americans.

“But, though it is not generally known that La Fayette slept under the tree, Professor Garlach has learned of it in some way. Such is his hatred of all things French, as you well know, that he has planned to destroy the tree. At midnight to-night he is going to put a dynamite bomb in the tree, and blow it to atoms. He hopes the plot will be laid to the students. If you wish to foil him be at the tree at midnight. I will sign myself only

“NAPOLEON.”

“Ha! destroy zat sacred tree by dynamite!” murmured Professor Socrat. “I will be zere! I will be zere!”

It lacked some time before twelve o’clock that night, when several figures stole out of a dormitory of Washington Hall.

“Have you got everything, Jack?” asked a voice.

“Yes; but for cats’ sake, keep quiet,” was the rejoinder. “Come on now. Lucky Martin didn’t spot us.”

“That’s what,” added Nat Anderson. “Scouring sky-rockets, but there’ll be some fun!”

“Easy!” cautioned Jack as he led a band of fellow conspirators toward the lake.

They reached the old, hollow oak tree, of which Jack had spoken in his two letters to the professors, and which he had made the rendezvous for his joke. Into the hollow he thrust a bundle of papers. Then, some distance away from the tree, he stuck something else upright in the ground, and trailing off from it were what seemed to be twisted strings.

“Lucky it’s a dark night,” whispered Bony. “They won’t see each other until they get right here. What time is it now?”

“Lacks a quarter of twelve,” replied Jack, striking a match and shielding it from

observation under the flap of his coat as he looked at his watch.

The boys crouched down in the bushes and waited. It was not long before they heard some one approaching in the darkness.

“That’s Garlach by the way he walks,” whispered Bob Movel.

“Yes,” assented Jack. “I hope Socrat is on time.”

The German professor approached the tree, anxious to take from it the papers that were to prove the valor of German soldiers. A moment later another figure loomed up in the darkness on the other side of the big trunk.

“There’s Socrat,” whispered Nat. “But what is he carrying?”

“Blessed if I know,” answered Jack; “but we’ll soon see.”

He struck a match and touched it to the end of the twisted strings. There was a splutter of flame, and some sparks ran along the ground. A moment later the scene was lighted up by glaring red fire, the fuse of which Jack had touched off. By the illumination the boys hidden in the bushes could see Professor Garlach, with his hand and arm down the hollow of the old oak tree. At the same time Professor Socrat rushed forward, and what he had in his hand was a pail of water.

“So!” cried the Frenchman. “I have caught you in ze act! I will foil you!”

“Don’t bodder me!” cried the German. “Ach! You would steal der evidence of your countrymen’s cowardice, would you? But you shall not! I vill haf my revenge!”

“Stop! stop!” cried Professor Socrat. “You shall not destroy ze tree under which ze immortal Washington and La Fayette slept! You shall not! I, Professor Socrat, say it! Ha! you have already lighted ze dynamite fuse! But I will destroy it!”

Professor Garlach drew from the tree the bundle of papers. No sooner had he done so than Professor Socrat dashed the pail of water over him, drenching him from head to foot.

“Du meine zeit! Himmel! Hund vot you are! I am drowning!” cried the German, choking.

“Ha! ha! I have put out ze fuse! I have quenched ze dynamite cartridge! Ze tree shall not be blown to atoms! I will drape it wiz my country’s flag.”

From his coat the French professor drew the tri-colored flag, which he draped over the lowest branches of the old tree. Then, as the red fire died out, the boys saw the German make a spring for his enemy.

“Come on, fellows!” softly called Jack. “We’d better skip while they’re at one another.”

They glided from the bushes, while at the foot of the tree, in the dying glow from the red fire, could be seen two shapes struggling desperately together. From the midst came such alternate expressions as:

“Ach! Pig-dog! Frog-eater! Sauerkraut! Maccaroni! Himmel! Sacre! La Fayette!”

“Oh, but aren’t they having a grand time!” said Nat as he hurried along at Jack’s side. “It worked like a charm. But who would have thought that Socrat would have brought along a pail of water?”

“Couldn’t have been better,” admitted Jack, “if I do say it myself.”

“But won’t they find out who did it?” asked Bony.

“They may suspect, but they’ll never know for sure,” said the perpetrator of the trick.

“How about the bundle of papers you left in the tree?”

“Nothing but newspapers, and they can’t talk. But I guess we’ve livened things up some. Anyhow, they’ve spoken to each other.”

“They sure have,” admitted Sam, as from the darkness, at the foot of the tree, came the sounds of voices in high dispute.

The next day Professor Socrat passed Professor Garlach without so much as a look in the direction of the German, but when he got past he muttered:

“Ze La Fayette tree still stands.”

And Professor Garlach replied:

“Pig-dog vot you are! To destroy dot secret of history!”

Jack and his chums awaited rather anxiously the calling of the French and German classes that day, but neither professor made any reference to the happenings of the night previous. All there was to remind a passer-by of it were some shreds of a French flag hanging to the limbs of the tree.

“They must have ripped the flag apart in their struggle with each other,” said Sam as he and Jack passed the place.

Matters at Washington Hall went on the even tenor of their ways for about two weeks. The boys buckled down to study, though there was plenty of time for sport, and the football eleven, of which Jack was a member, played several games.

The weather was getting cold and snappy, and there were signs of an early and severe winter. These signs were borne out one morning when Jack crawled out of bed.

“Whew! but it’s cold!” he said as he pulled aside the window curtains and looked out. Then he uttered an exclamation. “Say, Nat, it’s snowing to beat the band!”

“Snowing?”

“Sure, and I’ve got to go to the village this afternoon. Look!”

Nat crawled out, shivering, and stood beside Jack.

“Why, it is quite a storm,” he admitted. “B-r-r-r-r! I’m going to get my flannels out!”

“No football game to-morrow,” said Jack. “I guess winter’s come to stay.”

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE CONFESSION

“Say, Jack,” began Nat at breakfast a little later, “what are you going to the village for?”

“Got to get something Aunt Angelina sent me,” replied our hero. “I got a letter saying she had forwarded me a package by express. It’s got some heavy underwear in it for one thing, but I know enough of my aunt to know that’s not all that’s in it.”

“What else?”

“Well, I shouldn’t be surprised if there were some pies and doughnuts and cakes and——”

“Quit!” begged Bony, who sat on the other side of Jack. “You make me hungry.”

“What’s the matter with this grub?” inquired Jack.

“Oh, it’s all right as far as it goes——”

“Smithering slaboleens!” exclaimed Nat. “Doesn’t it go far enough in you, Bony?” and he looked at his tall chum. “Do you want it to go all the way to your toes?”

“No; but when I hear Jack speak of pies and doughnuts——”

“You’ll do more than hear me speak of them if they come, Bony,” went on Jack. “We’ll have a little feast in my room to-night, when Martin, the monitor, is gone to bed.”

“When are you going?” asked Nat.

“Right after dinner. Want to come along? I guess you can get permission. I did.”

“Nope. I’ve got to stay here and bone up on geometry. I flunked twice this week, and Doc. Mead says I’ve got to do better. Take Bony.”

“Not for mine,” said Bony, shivering as he looked out of the window and saw the snow still coming down. “I’m going to stay in.”

“Then I’ll go alone,” decided Jack, and he started off soon after the midday meal. The storm was not a severe one, though it was cold and the snow was quite heavy. It was a good three-mile walk to the village, but Jack had often taken it.

He was about a mile from the school, and was swinging along the country road, thinking of many things, when, through the white blanket of snowflakes, he saw a figure just ahead of him on the highway.

“That looks familiar,” he said to himself. “That’s Will Williams. Wonder what he can be doing out here? Guess he’s going to town also. I’ll catch up with him. I wish I could get better acquainted with him, but he goes in his shell as soon as I try to make friends.”

He hastened his pace, but it was slow going on account of the snow. When Jack was about a hundred yards behind Will he was surprised to see the odd student suddenly turn off the main road and make toward a chain of small hills that bordered it on the right.

“That’s queer,” murmured Jack. “I wonder what he’s doing that for?”

He stood still a moment, looking at Will. The new boy kept on, plodding through the snow, which lay in heavy drifts over the unbroken path he was taking.

“Why, he’s heading for the ravine,” said Jack to himself. “He’ll be lost if he goes there in this storm, and it’s dangerous. He may fall down the chasm and break an arm or a leg.”

The ravine he referred to was a deep gully in the hills, a wild, desolate sort of place, seldom visited. It was in the midst of thick woods, and more than once solitary travelers had lost their way there, while one or two, unfamiliar with the suddenness with which the chasm dipped down, had fallen and been severely hurt.

“What in the world can he want out there?” went on Jack. “I’d better hail him. Guess he doesn’t know the danger, especially in a storm like this, when bad holes are likely to be hidden from sight.”

He hurried forward, and then, making a sort of megaphone of his hands, called out:

“Williams! I say, Williams, where are you going?”

The new boy turned quickly, looked back at Jack, and then continued his journey.

“Hey! Come back!” yelled our hero. “You’ll be lost if you go up in those hills. It’s dangerous! Come on back!”

Williams stopped again, and turned half around.

“Guess he didn’t hear me plainly,” thought Jack. “I’ll catch up to him. Wait a minute,” he called again, and he hastened forward, Will waiting for him.

“Where are you going?” asked Jack, when he had caught up to him.

“I don’t know,” was the answer, and Jack was struck by the lad’s despondent tone.

“Don’t you know there’s a dangerous ravine just ahead here?” went on Jack. “You might tumble in and lose your life.”

“I don’t care if I do lose my life,” was the unexpected rejoinder.

“You don’t care?” repeated Jack, much surprised.

“No.”

“Do you realize what you’re saying?” asked Jack sternly.

“Yes, I do. I don’t care! I want to be lost! I never want to see any one again! I came out here—I don’t care what becomes of me—I’d like to fall down under the snow and—and die—that would end it all!”

Then, to Jack’s astonishment, Will burst into tears, though he bravely tried to stifle them.

“Well—of all the——” began Jack, and words failed him. Clearly he had a most peculiar case to deal with. He took a step nearer, and put his arm affectionately around Will’s shoulder. Then he patted him on the back, and his own voice was a

trifle husky as he said:

“Say, old man, what’s the matter? Own up, now, you’re in trouble. Maybe I can help you. It doesn’t take half an eye to see that’s something’s wrong. The idea of a chap like you wanting to die! It’s nonsense. You must be sick. Brace up, now! Tell me all about it. Maybe I can help you.”

There was silence, broken only by Will’s half-choked sobs.

“Go ahead, tell me,” urged Jack. “I’ll keep your secret, and help you if I can. Tell me what the trouble is.”

“I will!” exclaimed the new boy with sudden determination. “I will tell you, Jack Ranger, but I don’t think you can help me. I’m the most miserable lad at Washington Hall.”

“You only think so,” rejoined Jack brightly. “Go ahead. I’ll wager we can make you feel better. You want some friends, that’s what you want.”

“Yes,” said Will slowly, “I do. I need friends, for I don’t believe I’ve got a single one in the world.”

“Well, you’ve got one, and that’s me,” went on Jack. “Go ahead, now, let’s hear your story.”

And then, standing in the midst of the storm, Will told his pitiful tale.

“My father and mother have been dead for some time,” he said, “and for several years I lived with my uncle, Andrew Swaim, my mother’s brother. He was good to me, but he had to go out West on business, and he left me in charge of a man named Lewis Gabel, who was appointed my guardian.

“This Gabel treated me pretty good at first, for my uncle sent money regularly for my board. Then, for some reason, the money stopped coming, and Mr. Gabel turned mean. He hardly gave me enough to eat, and I had to work like a horse on his farm. I wrote to my uncle, but I never got an answer.

“Then, all at once, my uncle began sending money again, but he didn’t state where he was. After that I had it a little easier, until some one stole quite a sum from Mr. Gabel. He’s a regular miser, and he loves money more than anything else. He accused me of robbing him, and declared he wouldn’t have me around

his house any longer.

“So he sent me off to this school, but he doesn’t give me a cent of spending money, and pays all the bills himself. He still thinks I stole his money, and he says he will hold back my spending cash, which my uncle forwards, until he has made up the amount that was stolen.

“I tried to prove to him that I was innocent, but he won’t believe me. He is always writing me mean letters, reminding me that I am a thief, and not fit for decent people to associate with. I’m miserable, and I wish I was dead. I got a mean, accusing letter from him to-day, and it made me feel so bad that I didn’t care what became of me. I wandered off, and I thought if I fell down and died under the snow it would be a good thing.”

“Say, you certainly are up against it,” murmured Jack. “I’d like to get hold of that rascally guardian of yours. But why don’t you tell your uncle?”

“I can’t, for I don’t know his address.”

“But he sends money for your schooling and board to Mr. Gabel, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, but he sends cash in a letter, and he doesn’t even register it. I wrote to the postal authorities of the Western city where his letters were mailed, but they said they could give me no information.”

“What is your uncle doing in the West?”

“He is engaged in some secret mission. I never could find out what it is, and I don’t believe Mr. Gabel knows, either. Oh, but Gabel is a mean man! He seems to take delight in making me miserable. Now you know why I act so queerly. I like a good time, and I like to be with the fellows, but I haven’t a cent to spend to treat them with, and I’m not going to accept favors that I can’t return. Why, I haven’t had a cent to spend for myself in six months!”

Jack whistled.

“That’s tough,” he said. “But say, Will, you’re mistaken if you think our crowd cares anything for money. Why didn’t you say something about this before?”

“I—I was ashamed to.”

“Why, we thought you didn’t like us,” went on Jack. “Now I see that we were mistaken. I wish we had Mr. Gabel here. We’d haze him first, and throw him into the lake afterward. Now, Will, I’ll tell you what you’re going to do?”

“What?” asked the lad, who seemed much better in spirits, now that he had made a confession.

“In the first place, you’re coming to the village with me,” said Jack. “Then you’re going to forget all about your troubles and about dying under the snow. Then, when I get a bundle from home, you’re coming back with me, and——”

“Home!” exclaimed Will with a catch in his voice. “How good that word sounds! I—I haven’t had a home in so long that—that I don’t know what it seems like.”

“Well, we’re going to make you right at home here,” went on Jack. “I’m expecting a bundle of good things from my aunt, and when it comes, why, you and me and Nat and Sam and Bony and Fred and Bob, and some other choice spirits, are going to gather in my room to-night, and we’re going to have the finest spread you ever saw. I’ll make you acquainted with the boys, and then we’ll see what happens. No spending money? As if we cared for that! Now, come on, old chap, we’ll leg it to the village, for it’s cold standing here,” and clapping Will on the back, Jack linked his arm in that of the new boy and led him back to the road.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MIDNIGHT FEAST

“Well, fellows, are we all here?” asked Jack Ranger later that night, as he gazed around on a crowd in his room.

“If there were any more we couldn’t breathe,” replied Bony Balmore, and the cracking of his finger knuckles punctuated his remark.

“When does the fun begin?” asked Bob Movel.

“Soon,” answered Jack.

“We ought to have some music. Tune up, Fred,” said Sam.

“Not here,” interposed Jack quickly. “Wait a bit and we can make all the noise we want to.”

“How’s that?” inquired Bony. “Have you hypnotized Dr. Mead and put wax in Martin’s ears so he can’t hear us?”

“No, but it’s something just as good. This afternoon I sat and listened while Socker, the janitor, told me one of his war stories.”

“You must have had patience,” interrupted Nat Anderson. “Bob cats and bombshells, but Socker is tiresome!”

“Well, I had an object in it,” explained Jack. “I wanted him to do me a favor, and he did it—after I’d let him tell me how, single-handed, he captured a lot of Confederates. I told him about this spread to-night, and was lamenting the fact that my room was so small, and that we couldn’t make any noise, or have any lights. And you know how awkward it is to eat in the dark.”

“Sure,” admitted Bony. “You can’t always find your mouth.”

“And if there’s anything I dislike,” added Nat, “it’s putting pie in my ear.”

“Easy!” cautioned Jack at the laugh which followed. “Wait a few minutes and

we can make all the noise we want to.”

“How?” asked Bony.

“Because, as I’m trying to tell you, Socker did me a favor. He’s going to let us in the storeroom, back of where the boiler is, in the basement. It’ll be nice and warm there, and we can have our midnight feast in comfort, and make all the row we like, for Martin can’t hear us there.”

“Good for you, Jack!” cried Nat.

“That’s all to the horse radish!” observed Sam.

Jack’s trip to town that afternoon had been most successful. He had found at the express office a big package from home, and from the note that accompanied it he knew it contained good things to eat, made by his loving aunts. But, desiring to give an unusually fine spread to celebrate the occasion of having made the acquaintance of Will Williams, Jack purchased some other good things at the village stores.

He and Will carried them back to school, and managed to smuggle them in. It was a new experience for Will to have a friend like Jack Ranger, and to be taking part in this daring but harmless breach of the school rules. Under this stimulus Will was fast losing his melancholy mood, and he responded brightly to Jack’s jokes.

“Now you stay in your room until I call for you,” our hero had said to Will on parting after supper that night. Jack wanted to spring a sort of surprise on his chums, and introduce Will to them at the feast. In accordance with his instructions the lads had gathered in his room about ten o’clock that night, stealing softly in after Martin, the monitor, had made his last round to see that lights were out. Then Jack had announced his plan of having the feast in the basement.

“Grab up the grub and come on,” said the leader a little later. “Softly now—no noise until we’re downstairs.”

“Will Socker keep mum?” asked Bony.

“As an oyster in a church sociable stew,” replied Jack. “I’ve promised to listen to

another of his war tales.”

“Jack’s getting to be a regular martyr,” observed Sam.

“Silence in the ranks!” commanded Captain Jack.

The lads stole softly along the corridors. Just as they got opposite the door of Martin’s room, there was a dull thud.

“What’s that?” whispered Jack softly.

“I—I dropped one of the pies,” replied Bony, cracking his knuckles at the double-quick in his excitement.

“Scoop it up and come on. You’ll have to eat it,” said Jack.

In fear and trembling they went on. Fortunately, Martin did not hear the noise, and the lads got safely past.

Jack, who was in the rear, paused at a door at the end of the hall, and knocked softly.

“Yes,” answered a voice from within.

“Come on,” commanded Jack, and he was joined by a dark figure.

They reached the basement safely, no one having disputed their night march. Socker, the janitor, met them at the door of the boiler-room.

“Here we are,” said Jack.

“So I see, Mr. Ranger. Why, it reminds me of the time when Captain Crawford and me took a forced night march of ten miles to get some rations. We were with Sherman, on his trip to the sea, and——”

“You must be sure to tell me that story,” interrupted Jack. “But not now. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, Mr. Ranger. But I depend on you not to say anything about this to Dr. Mead in case——”

“Oh, you can depend on us,” Jack assured him.

“I thought I could. It reminds me of the time when we were before Petersburg, and a comrade and I went to——”

“You must not forget to tell me that story,” interrupted Jack. “I particularly want to hear it, Socker.”

“I will,” said the janitor, delighted that he had at last found an earnest listener.

“But not now,” said Jack. “We must get to work. Do you like pie, Socker?”

“Do I, Mr. Ranger? Well, I guess I do. I remember once when we were at Gettysburg——”

“Bony, where’s that extra choice pie you had?” asked Jack with a wink at his chum. “Give it to Mr. Socker here,” and Bony passed over the bit of pastry that had met with the accident in the hall.

“That will keep him quiet for a while,” said Jack in a whisper.

The lads, bearing the good things Jack had provided, passed through the boiler-room and into a storage apartment, where cans of oil, waste, tools and the like were kept. Socker had arranged some boards on a couple of sawhorses for the students, and there, by the light of several candles stuck in the necks of bottles, the table was spread.

“Say, but this is jolly, all right,” said Sam Chalmers. “Jack, you’re a public benefactor.”

He leaned over to shake hands with our hero.

“Look out! You’ll upset the table!” cried Jack, as Sam, leaning against the boards, tilted them.

“Save the pieces!” cried Nat, springing to the rescue.

“Gentlemen, be seated!” invited Jack as the lads arranged themselves about the table. Socker had provided planks, stretched across big, empty oilcans. “Here you are, Will, right next to me,” went on our hero in a low tone to the lad who had joined him in the dark hall. “I’ll introduce you presently.”

No one of Jack’s chums had yet noticed the new lad, for Will had kept in the

shadows, and there was much confusion attending the placing of the good things on the board. But as the guests prepared to seat themselves, Sam Chalmers caught sight of the unfamiliar face of Will Williams. He knew he was not one of Jack's crowd, and thinking the lad might have come uninvited he said:

"We have a stranger with us."

There was a sudden hush, and all eyes were fastened on Will, who turned red.

"He is a stranger," said Jack quickly, "but we are going to cure that. Boys of Washington Hall—the top-notchers—the élite—the high-rollers—the cream of the bunch—allow me to present my friend Bill Williams. He is one of us, though I didn't know it until to-day. I'm giving this blowout in his honor. Henceforth he is one of us, and in token of that we will dub him not William, but Bill, which has a more kindly sound. Fellows, salute our new member!"

CHAPTER IX

AN ALARM OF FIRE

There was a moment's pause after Jack's announcement, then, as one, the assembled lads bowed to Will, or, as he was to be more affectionately called, Bill. He blushed with pleasure at the new sensation of having friends.

"New member of the Irrepressibles, we, who are about to dine, salute thee!" exclaimed Sam.

"We sure do, and now, if the salutin' ceremony is over, let's eat," suggested Bob Movel.

"Wait until Fred gives us a tune," came from Nat. "Jumping gewhillikins, but they always have music at a banquet!"

"Then don't let Fred play—if you want music," said Sam, dodging behind Jack to be out of the musical student's reach.

"I'll punch your head!" exclaimed Fred.

"No, go on and play," said Jack. "It will liven things up a bit."

So Fred got out his mouth-organ, and rendered a lively march, the boys parading around the table, each one clapping on the back the new member of the informal club.

"Now I guess we can eat," announced Jack. "Bill, pass that plate of sandwiches at your elbow. Fred, juggle the doughnuts down this way. Sam, don't let those pies go to sleep. Bob, you open some of the ginger-ale, but don't let it pop too loud, or Doc. Mead may think it's the safety valve of the boiler going off, and send Martin to investigate."

The lads were soon actively engaged in putting away the good things, and then, for a time, conversation languished, save for intermittent remarks.

"Are you having a good time, boys?" asked Socker, poking his head in the

storeroom, after having shoveled some coal on the fire.

“We sure are, and we’re much obliged to you,” replied Jack.

“Oh, that’s all right. It reminds me, to see you all eating, of how I once was nearly starved in Andersonville prison. I was in there——”

“I’m coming out to hear that story in about five minutes, Socker,” interrupted Jack. “Have it all ready for me.”

“I will,” promised the janitor, as he went back to look at the boiler.

It was a merry time, and Will, or, as the boys called him, Bill, enjoyed it more than any one. It seemed as if a new world had opened before him. His face lost the downcast look, his eyes were brighter, and he even ventured to make one or two jokes. The boys seemed to like him, and Jack was glad of it, for he had a genuine admiration for the new boy, and wanted to befriend him.

To some of his chums he told something of Will’s story, and there was general indignation expressed against the mean guardian.

“Well, fellows, I guess we’ve eaten everything except the table and the candles,” said Jack after a while. “I think we’d better be getting back to our rooms, for Martin may take it into his head to pay a late visit.”

The advice was timely, and as the lads had had a jolly evening, they prepared to disperse. They cleared away the remains of the feast, leaving Socker to put aside the boards, cans and bottles. As they filed out of the boiler-room, Socker called to Jack:

“I’m all ready to tell you that story now.”

“I’ve got to see these infants to bed,” replied our hero with a wink. “Then I’ll be back, Socker. Think over all the points in the story. I don’t want to lose any.”

“I’ll do that, Mr. Ranger,” and Socker sat down in a chair before the fire and began to think deeply.

The students reached their rooms without being detected, whispering to Jack, on their way, their thanks for the spread.

“I’ve had the best time in my life!” exclaimed Will as he clasped Jack’s hand at his door. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“Then don’t try,” replied Jack. “Brace up, and you’ll be all right.”

“I will.”

Whether it was the effect of the pie or doughnuts Jack never knew, but some time during the night he began to dream that he had swallowed a big piece of pastry the wrong way, and it was choking him. He sat up, gasping for breath, and found to his horror that his room was full of smoke.

“There’s a fire!” he spoke aloud. Then he called to Nat, who was in the bed across from him:

“Nat! Nat! Wake up! There’s a fire!”

“No, I can’t get up any higher,” sleepily responded Nat, turning over in bed, and evidently thinking that his chum had asked him to climb up a tree.

“It’s a fire!” cried Jack, springing from bed. “There’s a fire, Nat!”

This roused the sleeping lad, who also bounded out from under the covers. There was no doubt about it. Their room was filled with smoke, which was getting thicker every minute.

“Fire! Fire! Fire!” yelled Jack, for he heard no one stirring about in the school dormitory, and he rightly guessed that he was the first to sound the alarm.

His call was sufficient to arouse students on either side of him, and then Martin and several of the teachers came running from their apartments.

“Where is the fire, Ranger?” asked Mr. Gales, one of the mathematical instructors.

“I don’t know, but my room is full of smoke.”

Just then, from somewhere below stairs, sounded a cry:

“Fire! Fire! There’s a fire in the boiler-room! Help!”

“That’s Socker, the janitor,” declared Jack. “Come on, fellows, we’ll help him.”

He rushed for the stairs, attired in his pajamas and slippers, and was followed by Nat and a score of other students.

“Boys, boys! Be careful!” called Mr. Gales.

Meanwhile, the smoke was getting thicker, and every one was beginning to cough.

“Fire! Fire!” yelled Socker.

Jack, leading the rush of pupils through the smoke, soon reached the boiler-room in the basement. Through the clouds of vapor, illuminated by gasjets here and there left burning all night in case of accident, he could see the flicker of flames.

“Come on!” he called. “There are some pails with water along the wall, and a couple of hand extinguishers!”

They reached the engine-room, to find a blaze in one corner, where Socker kept some waste, cans of oil, old rags and brooms. The fire had been eating toward the storeroom, where the midnight feast had been held.

“Forward the fire brigade!” yelled Jack as he grabbed up an extinguisher and began to play it on the flames, while some of his chums caught up pails of water, kept filled for just such an emergency.

The flames were beginning to crackle now, and the fire seemed likely to be a bad one.

Suddenly Socker, who was running about doing nothing, looked at the boiler and cried out:

“Run! Everybody run! The safety valve has caught, and the boiler will blow up! Run! Run!”

The boys needed no second warning. Jack paused for a moment, for the stream from his extinguisher was beginning to quench the flames, but as he saw Socker fleeing from the room, and as he reflected that it would be dangerous to remain, he turned and fled, carrying the apparatus with him.

“Everybody out!” cried Socker. “Get ’em all out! The boiler will blow up!”

The lads, lightly clad, fled through the basement door out into the night. The snow, which had ceased that evening, had started in again, and the storm was howling as if in glee at the plight of the students of Washington Hall, who were driven from their beds by fire.

CHAPTER X

SAVING THE FLAGS

“Telephone for the town fire department!” cried Dr. Mead, who had been apprised of the fire. He, like all the others, was out in the storm, with a few clothes he had hastily donned.

“They can’t get in the boiler-room to fight the fire!” cried Socker.

“Why not?”

“Because the boiler will blow up. Something is wrong with the safety valve, and there are two hundred pounds of steam on. The boiler is only meant for one hundred.”

“How did the fire start? What made the safety valve get out of order?” asked the principal.

The group of students and teachers, standing in the storm, could now see the bright flicker of flames in the boiler-room. “I don’t know,” replied Socker. “I was asleep in front of the boiler, waiting to put some more coal on, when all of a sudden I smelled smoke.”

“How long before the boiler will go up?” asked Dr. Mead anxiously. “I have some valuable books I must save.”

He started to re-enter the school.

“Don’t go back!” cried Socker. “It’s liable to go up any minute!”

Dr. Mead returned to the waiting group, his face betraying intense excitement.

“We must get the fire out!” he cried. “Can’t some one send word to the village?”

“There’s a telephone in Mr. Raspen’s house, about half a mile away,” volunteered Sam. “I’ll run there.”

He started off, and just as he did so a series of alarming cries broke out at one of

the upper corridor windows of the school.

“Fire! Fire!” cried a voice. “Der school ist being gonsumed by der fierce elements! Safe me, somebodies! I must get out my German flag! I must out get quvick, alretty yet!”

The anxious face of Professor Garlach appeared at one of the windows.

“Don’t jump!” cried Jack, as the teacher seemed about to do so. “You’ve got time enough to come down the stairs.”

“B-r-r-r-r! It’s cold!” cried Nat Anderson, as some snow got inside the slippers he had put on, and some flakes sifted down his back.

“It will soon be warm enough,” observed Jack. “The fire is gaining. Poor Washington Hall! It deserved a better fate than being burned down.”

“Look!” cried Sam, who had paused in his run to go to the telephone. “There’s Socrat.”

The French professor had joined his German colleague at the window, and both were struggling to climb out of it.

“Stand aside, German brute zat you aire!” exclaimed the Frenchman. “I must save ze glorious flag of la belle France! Let me toss it out of ze window!”

“I vill nottings of der kind do alretty yet!” responded Professor Garlach. “I vos here firstest!”

“Zen you are no gentlemans!” was Professor Socrat’s reply. “Bah! Sacre! Let me out, I demand of you! I am insult zat you should flout zat rag in my eyes!”

The wind had blown the German flag, which Professor Garlach held, into the face of the Frenchman.

“Rag! Hein! You call dot glorious flag a rag! Himmel! I vill of der mincemeat you make now!”

Professor Garlach made a grab for his enemy. To do so he lost his hold on his precious flag. It fluttered out of the window and to the ground.

“Save it! Save it!” he cried, leaning out. “My flag!”

“I’ll get it,” shouted Jack.

With a quick movement the German snatched the French colors from the hand of Professor Socrat. An instant later that, too, was fluttering to the snow.

“Oh! la belle tri-color! It is insult! I moost have blood to satisfy my honaire!” shouted the Frenchman.

He made a lunge, and clasped Professor Garlach about the neck. The two struggled at the window. With a quick wit Jack grabbed the two flags, and, waving them, intertwined, above his head, he shouted:

“See, professors! A German-French alliance at last. Both flags are saved. They have not touched the ground. Now come on down and get them. Quick! The fire is gaining!”

“Ach! Dot is goot! Der flag is not sullied!” called Professor Garlach.

“And mine also—my beautiful tri-color, eet is safe!” added Professor Socrat. “Ranger, you are ze one grand gentleman. I salute you!” and the enthusiastic Frenchman blew Jack a kiss.

The two enemies, reconciled by the flag incident, embraced each other, and as Jack called to them to make haste down the stairway, they disappeared from the window.

Meanwhile, the smoke was pouring from the boiler-room, and the flames were brighter. Sam had raced off through the storm to the telephone to summon the fire department.

“Say, I don’t believe that boiler’s going to blow up,” announced Jack. “If it was going to, it would have done so long ago. I’m going to take a look.”

“No, no,” begged Socker. “You’ll all risk your life!”

“Don’t be rash, Ranger,” cautioned Dr. Mead.

“I think Socker exaggerated the danger,” replied our hero. “I’m going to take a look.”

He ran back to the engine-room and looked in. He could see the boiler plainly, as

the place was brightly illuminated by the flames. His eyes sought the steam gage.

“Why!” he cried. “There are only twenty pounds of steam on! Socker took it for two hundred. There’s no danger. That’s a low pressure.”

Then he raised his voice in a shout:

“Come on, fellows! Help put out the fire! There’s no danger! The boiler’s all right!”

There was an immediate rush. Jack still held his extinguisher, and Nat Anderson had secured one. Several other students, hearing Jack’s reassuring news, rushed into the school, and came back with pieces of hand apparatus.

“Now to douse the fire!” yelled Jack, again turning on the chemical stream.

“Use snow!” cried Bob Movel. “That will help!”

He scooped up some in a water pail that he had emptied, and tossed the mass of white crystals on the edge of the flames, which were in one corner of the boiler-room. There was a hissing sound, a cloud of steam arose, and the fire at that particular point died out.

“That’s the stuff!” cried Jack, and other students and some of the teachers followed Bob’s example. The fire was fast being gotten under control, and Socker, returning to the boiler-room, had attached a small hose to a faucet, and was playing water on the flames.

Suddenly, above the noise made by the shouting lads, the hiss of snow and water, and the snapping of the flames, there sounded a cry of distress.

“Help! Help! Help!”

“Some one is caught by the flames! They must have eaten their way up to the upper floors!” cried Dr. Mead.

“It iss dot boy Snaith—he und two odders!” announced Professor Garlach, rushing into the boiler-room, his beloved German flag clasped in his arms, where Jack had placed it.

“Quick! Sacre! We must not let zem perish!” added Professor Socrat, as he caught up a big fire shovel and dashed from the basement. “I will rescue zem!”

“Und me also,” added Professor Garlach as he grabbed up a long poker.

“There can’t be much danger,” said Jack. “The fire is almost out. Here, Nat, you keep things moving here, and I’ll take a look.”

He ran out into the storm. Looking up at the side of the school, he saw, framed in a window, behind which a light burned, the figures of Dock Snaith, Pud Armstrong and Glen Forker.

“Save us! Save us!” cried Dock. “We can’t get out.”

“Catch me! I’m going to jump!” yelled Pud.

“No! no! Don’t!” Jack called. “There’s no danger. I’ll come and get you!” and he dashed into the main entrance of the school.

CHAPTER XI

THE GUN CLUB

For a few moments after Jack's disappearance into the burning school, the spectators, pupils and teachers hardly knew what to do or say. The thick volumes of smoke that rolled out, even though they knew the fire in the boiler-room was under control, seemed to indicate that the conflagration was raging in some other part of the building.

"Ach! Dot brafe Ranger fellow!" exclaimed Professor Garlach. "He vill burned be alretty yet! Ach Himmel! Der school will down burn!"

"So! Sacre!" exclaimed the French professor. "It iss too true, zat which you speak. Terrible! terrible!"

"Und dose odder boys! Der flames vill gonsume dem also!" wailed the German.

"But ze flags—ze flags of our countries—zey are safe!" exclaimed Professor Socrat, and at this thought the two former enemies threw their arms about each other.

Meanwhile, Jack was dashing upstairs.

"I don't see any signs of fire," he said. "I believe it's only smoke, after all."

Up he went to the floor where Dock Snaith and his cronies had their rooms. The smoke was very thick, but there were no evidences of flame. And as Jack reached the trio, who were still leaning out of the window and calling for help, he saw that a lighted gasjet, reflecting through the clouds of vapor, had made it appear as if there were flames.

"Oh! will no one save us!" cried Snaith. "Fellows, I guess we're going to die!" and he began to whimper.

"No! no!" yelled Pud Armstrong. "Let's jump!"

"I'm—I'm afraid!" blubbered Snaith.

“Come on!” cried Jack, bursting into the room. “There’s no danger. It’s only smoke. The fire’s ’most out.”

“Are you—are you sure?” faltered Glen Forker.

“Yes. Come on! It’s all down in the boiler-room.”

Thus assured, the three bullies, who were the worst kind of cowards, followed Jack through the smoke-filled corridors. When the four appeared there was a cheer, and Professors Socrat and Garlach embraced each other again.

“It’s all out!” cried Nat Anderson, running from the boiler-room. “Fire’s all out!”

He was smoke-begrimed, and his thin clothing was wet through.

“Are you sure there is no more danger?” asked Dr. Mead.

“None at all,” answered Nat.

Jack hurried up to join his chum. The snow was changing into rain, mingled with sleet, and it was freezing as it fell.

“Say, if I was you I’d go in,” exclaimed a voice at Jack’s elbow, and he turned to see a lad standing near him, whose lower jaw was slowly moving up and down, for he was chewing gum.

“Hello, Budge,” said Jack. “Where have you been all this while?” For Budge Rankin, the odd character whom Jack had befriended by getting him the position of assistant janitor at Washington Hall, was clad in overcoat and cap.

“Me? Oh, I’ve been in town,” answered Budge, stretching some gum out of his mouth and beginning to pull it in again by the simple process of winding it around his tongue.

“In town?” questioned Nat.

“Yep. ’Smynightoff.”

“Oh, it was your night off,” repeated Jack, for Budge had a habit of running his words together.

“Yep. Wow! My gum’s frozen!” he exclaimed, pausing in the act of trying to

chew it again. "But say," he added, "if the fire's out, you'd better go inside. It's cold here."

"You're right; it is," admitted Jack, shivering.

"Here, take my coat," spoke Budge, starting to take it off.

"Indeed, I'll do nothing of the sort," replied Jack. "I'll go in and get warm."

"I guess that's what we'd all better do," added Nat, for the wintry wind was beginning to make itself felt, now that the exercise in putting out the fire no longer warmed them.

"Come, young gentlemen, get inside," called Dr. Mead, and the students filed back into the school. The smoke was rapidly clearing away, and after a tour of the building, to make sure the flames were not lurking in any unsuspected corners, the pupils were ordered to bed.

Jack and his chums managed to get a little sleep before morning, but when our hero awoke, after troubled dreams, he called out:

"Say, Nat, there doesn't seem to be any steam heat in this room."

"There isn't," announced Nat, after feeling of the radiator. "It's as cold as a stone."

"Socker must have let the fire in the boiler get low," went on Jack. "Probably he thought the blaze last night was enough. B-r-r-r! Let's get dressed in a hurry and go down where it's warm."

They soon descended to the main dining-room, where to their surprise they found a number of shivering students and teachers. There was no warmth in the radiators there, either.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack.

"Ach, Ranger," explained Professor Garlach, "der fire from der boiler has away gone, alretty, und dere is no more hot vasser mit vich more can be made yet. So ve haf der coldness."

"I should say we did," commented Jack. "Can't Socker start a new fire and get

up steam?”

“I believe not,” said a voice at Jack’s side, and he turned to see his new friend, Will Williams. “I heard the janitor tell Dr. Mead something was wrong with the boiler. They have gone to look at it.”

“I’m going to get my overcoat,” spoke Nat, and his example was followed by several others, for the room was very chilly. Presently Dr. Mead came in, followed by Socker.

“Young gentlemen of Washington Hall,” began the head of the school, “I regret to inform you that the fire last night has damaged the boiler in such a way that it is impossible to get up steam. I have just made an investigation, and the boiler will have to have extensive repairs. It will take some time to make them, and, I regret to say it, but I will have to close the school until after the holidays——”

“Hurrray!” yelled Nat.

The doctor looked shocked. Then he smiled.

“Such feeling is perhaps natural,” he said, “and I would resent it, only I know that Nat Anderson is a good pupil, who loves his school, as, I hope, you all do. But we cannot hold sessions in cold rooms. Now I suggest that you all retire to the general assembly room. There is a large fireplace there, and I will have the janitor build a blaze in it. You can at least have a warm breakfast, and discuss future plans.”

There was a buzz of excitement at once, and the lads made a rush for the assembly room. There, a little later, somewhat warmed by a big log fire, they ate breakfast. The fire of the night previous, it was learned, had been caused by spontaneous combustion among some oiled rags, and the damage was only in the boiler-room. There had been no need for the fire department from the village, and though Sam had summoned it, the order had been countermanded before the apparatus started, so there was no damage by water to the school. Some smoke-begrimed walls were the only evidence in the upper stories of the fire.

“Well,” remarked Nat Anderson, as Jack and several of his chums gathered around in a warm corner, “no more school for a couple of months, anyhow. Solidified snowballs! but I wonder what we’ll do all that time?”

“Go home and rest up,” suggested Bony Balmore as he cracked a couple of finger knuckles just to keep in practice.

“Rest! Why, we just had one during the summer vacation, Bony,” remarked Fred Kaler.

“Oh, I can use more,” said Bony. “What are you going to do, Jack?”

“I’m going hunting and camping,” announced Jack quietly.

“Hunting?” questioned Nat.

“Camping?” cried Sam Chalmers.

“Sure,” went on Jack. “I’ve been thinking of it for some time, but I didn’t see any opportunity of doing it. I’m going camping and hunting after big game out West, and I wish some of you fellows would go along.”

“We haven’t any guns—that is, such as would do for big game,” objected Nat.

“We can get ’em,” declared Jack. “I was thinking we fellows who went camping before might organize a sort of gun club and take a trip. Now that the school is to close, it will give us just the chance we want.”

“A gun club,” mused Nat. “Say, but that’s a fine idea! Petrified pedestrians! but we’ll call it Jack Ranger’s Gun Club! That will be a dandy name.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” said Jack quickly. “It won’t be my gun club any more than it will be yours or Bony’s or Sam’s.”

“But you’re organizing it.”

“That doesn’t make any difference. Every fellow will pay his own way. We’ll just call it a gun club.”

But, in spite of Jack’s objection, when the organization was perfected a little later, every one thought of it as Jack Ranger’s club, even if they didn’t say so.

“Where could we go hunting?” asked Nat. “There’s no big game around here.”

“I guess you’re right,” admitted Jack, “but I know where there is some, and I’m going.”

“Where?”

“Out in the Shoshone Mountains, in the ‘bad lands’ district of Wyoming. There’s the finest hunting in the United States.”

“Hurrah for the gun club!” cried Nat. “I’m going, too.”

“Well, don’t leave me behind,” pleaded Sam. “I guess you can count me in.”

Jack looked around at the eager faces of his chums. Then off in a corner he saw the somewhat downcast countenance of the new boy—Will Williams.

“I wonder if he wouldn’t like to go, too?” Jack said to himself.

CHAPTER XII

WILL RUNS AWAY

The boys gathered about the warm fire, crowding close around Jack to hear more details of the proposed trip of the gun club.

"I've been reading up about hunting big game," went on Jack, "and I asked my father if I could go the first chance I got. He said I could, and now I've got the chance."

"What are those bad lands?" asked Fred Kaler. "Any Indians out there?"

"Some, I guess. A few Sioux, Crows and some Shoshones. But they're mostly guides. You see, bad lands are what the Westerners call a region that isn't very good for anything but hunting. They consist of a lot of sandstone peaks, with deserts here and there."

"And what can you hunt there?" asked Nat.

"Oh, lots of things. Big-horn sheep, bears, elk, deer, jack-rabbits and birds. It will be lots of sport."

"Wyoming, eh?" mused Sam. "That's quite a way off."

"Yes, it is, but we've got lots of time. I've been making some inquiries, and they say the best spot to aim for is around the town of Cody, which is named after Buffalo Bill. You see, we can go to Fort Custer, and from there we have to travel in wagons or on horses. I've got a route all mapped out. We'll go along a small stream, called Sage Creek, across the Forty-mile Desert, and hunt along the Shoshone River, near Heart Mountain. It's a fine hunting ground, and we'll have no end of fun camping out."

"But it'll be cold," objected Bony. "There'll be snow."

"What of it?" asked Jack. "It'll do you good. We'll have warm tents, warm clothing, and we can build big camp fires that will make the ones here look like a baby bonfire."

“Gallopig gasmeters!” exclaimed Nat. “When can we start, Jack?”

“Oh, it’ll take some time to get ready. We’ve got to get the guns and camping outfit together.”

The boys talked for some considerable time about the prospective trip. Socker, meanwhile, came in to replenish the fire. In some of the rooms there were stoves and gas heaters, and these were soon in operation to take the chill off the apartments, for the big building, being without steam heat, was like a barn. Budge Rankin came in once with some logs for the fire.

“Goinome?” he said to Jack.

“Going home?” repeated our hero. “That’s what I am, Budge. Are you?”

“SoonsIkin.”

“As soon as you can, eh? Well, it will be this afternoon for mine,” went on Jack. “Can’t stay here and freeze.”

Dr. Mead and his assistants were busy arranging for the departure of the pupils, while the head of the school also telegraphed for new parts of the damaged boiler.

Jack and Nat packed their belongings, and prepared to start for Denton.

“Say, who all are going camping and hunting?” asked Nat, pausing in the act of thrusting his clothes into his trunk.

“Why, I was thinking if we could take the same crowd we had before you and I were captured and taken aboard the *Polly Ann* this summer, it would be nice,” replied Jack. “There’s you and Bony and Sam and me.”

“And Budge.”

“Oh, yes, Budge. I’ll take him along if he’ll go. He likes to putter around camp, but he doesn’t care much about hunting. He’d rather chew gum.”

Though Budge worked as assistant janitor at Washington Hall, Jack and his chums did not consider that his position was at all degrading. Jack felt that Budge was one of his best friends, and though the lad was poor he was

independent, which quality Jack liked in him.

“And I tell you some one else I’m going to take, if I can manage it,” went on our hero.

“Who?”

“Bill Williams. I like that fellow, and he’s had it pretty hard. I’d like to do something for him, and I’m going to ask him to come hunting with us.”

“S’pose he’ll go?”

“I don’t know. Guess I’ll go ask him now. Say, you finish crowding my stuff into my trunk, will you? We want to catch the twelve o’clock train for Denton.”

“Sure,” agreed Nat, ending his packing by the simple process of crowding all that remained of his clothes into the trunk and then jumping on them with both feet, so that they would collapse sufficiently to allow the lid to fasten.

Jack found the new boy sitting in his room beside his trunk and valise.

“All ready to go home?” asked Jack.

“Yes,” was the answer in a sad sort of voice.

“Why, you don’t seem to be very glad that school has closed, giving you an additional vacation,” remarked Jack.

“I’m not.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve got to go and live with my guardian. He hates me. He’ll be twitting me of how I robbed him, when I had no more to do with the loss of his money than—than you did. I was beginning to like it here, but now I’ve got to go back. It’s tough!”

“Say, how would you like to come with me?”

“Come with you? Where?”

“Hunting in the Shoshone Mountains.”

“Do you mean it?” asked Will eagerly, his eyes brightening. He sprang to his feet, all his sadness gone.

“Of course I mean it,” went on Jack. “Some of my chums are going to form a sort of gun club, and I’d like to include you in it. Will you come?”

“Will I come? Say, I——”

Then the lad paused. The light faded from his eyes. He sank back into his chair.

“No—no,” he said slowly. “I’m much obliged, but I—I guess I can’t go.”

“Why not?”

Will hesitated.

“Well—er—you see—er—the fact is, I haven’t any money. My guardian pays all the bills, and, as I told you, he doesn’t give me any spending money. Not even enough for a postage stamp.”

“That’s tough,” said Jack, “but I guess you didn’t quite understand me. I didn’t ask you to spend any money.”

“How can I go camping and hunting, away off in Wyoming, without money?”

“You’ll go as my guest,” said Jack simply. “I’m inviting you to go with me. The other fellows are coming on their own hook, as members of the gun club, but I’d like to have you come just as my guest. Will you do that?”

“Will I?” Once more the lad’s eyes sparkled. “Of course I will,” he said, “only it doesn’t seem right to have you pay my way. If my uncle only knew of my plight he’d give me some money, I’m sure, but I can’t even write to him. It’s quite mysterious the way he hides himself. I can’t understand it.”

“Then you’ll come?”

“Yes—but I don’t like to feel that it is costing you money.”

“Don’t let that worry you,” said Jack quickly. “I’m pretty well off, and my dad has all the money he can use. I guess you didn’t hear about the gold mine Nat and I helped discover when we were out West looking for my father.”

“No, I never did.”

“Well, that will keep the wolf from howling around the door for a while. I’m real glad you’re coming, Bill. I hope you’ll enjoy it.”

“I know I will. I’m fond of hunting and camping.”

“All right. Now I’m going back to Denton. I s’pose you’re going home, too?”

“Well, it isn’t much of a home. I live in Hickville with my guardian.”

“Hickville, eh? That’s about a hundred miles from Denton. Well, I was going to say that I’ll write you a few days before we start, and you can come on to Denton.”

“All right. I’ll do it.”

“Then I’ll go and finish packing. I left Nat Anderson to do it, and he’s just as likely to put things upside down as right side up. I’ll see you at Denton, then.”

“Yes,” replied Will. But Jack did not see the new boy at Denton, and not until some time after their parting at the school; and when he did see him, it was under strange circumstances.

Good-bys were said among the pupils and teachers of Washington Hall, and Jack and his chums separated, he and Nat journeying to Denton, which they reached that night, much to the surprise of Mr. Ranger, Jack’s three aunts, and Nat’s folks.

Jack lost no time in beginning his preparations for the camping trip, his father consenting that the gun club might be formed. Our hero wrote many letters, arranged for transportation to the West, got into communication with a guide near Cody, Wyoming, and invited Budge to go along.

“Sure I’ll go,” said the gum-chewing lad as he placed into his mouth a fresh wad of the sticky substance. “When’ll it be?”

“In about two weeks,” said Jack. “There are quite a few things to do yet.”

In the meanwhile, Nat Anderson, Sam Chalmers and Bony Balmore had secured permission from their parents to go with Jack, and they were busy at their

respective homes, making up their kits. Sam and Bony lived about a day's journey from Denton.

"Now I'll write to Bill, and invite him to come on," said Jack one night, and then he waited for a reply from the lad with whom he had so recently become friends.

"Here's Bill's answer," said Jack to Nat one afternoon a few days later, when they went down to the post-office, and Jack received a letter marked "Hickville."

As Jack read it he uttered a low whistle.

"What's the matter? Can't he come?" asked Nat.

"No. This is from his rascally guardian. It's to me. Bill's run away."

CHAPTER XIII

OFF ON THE TRIP

Nat stood still in the street and stared at Jack.

“What’s that you said?” he asked.

“Bill’s run away. Listen and I’ll read the letter to you. It says: ‘A few days ago my ward, William Williams, returned from Washington Hall, greatly to my regret. He explained the cause of his enforced vacation, and stated that you had asked him to go off on a hunting trip. Of course, I refused to let him go. In the first place I don’t believe in hunting, and for a lad of William’s age to go off to the West, where he may learn bad habits, is not the thing. Besides, I cannot trust him away from the authority of older persons.’”

“Wouldn’t that jolt you?” commented Jack as he looked up from the letter.

Nat nodded.

“Suffering snufflebugs!” he exclaimed. “That’s the limit—isn’t it, Jack?”

“Pretty near. Listen; there’s more to it: ‘When I told my ward that he could not go, he answered me very sharply that if his uncle was here he could get permission. That may be, but his uncle is not here. He begged to be allowed to go, but I was firm in my refusal. I do not believe in such nonsense as camping out, and I told William so.

“‘The other day, to my surprise, he disappeared from my home, and I have not been able to get a trace of him. I am forced to come to the conclusion that he has run away in a fit of anger, because I would not let him go camping with you. I hold you partly to blame for this, as it was wrong of you to ask him to go. I must therefore ask you, in case you see him, to at once compel him to return to me. I absolutely forbid him to go camping with you, and should he join you, you must send him back. He has defied me, and must be punished. If you see him, turn him over to the nearest police officer, inform me, and I will come and get him.’”

“Well, wouldn’t that loosen your liver pin!” exclaimed Nat. “Do you s’pose he’s

coming here, Jack?”

“I don’t know. I’m glad he ran away from such a mean man as Mr. Gabel, though. The idea of not letting him go camping! It’s a shame!”

“Will you make him go back if he does come?”

“Will I? Not much! I’ll take him camping.”

“That’s the stuff!” cried Nat. “Gollywoggled gimlet giblets! but some persons can be mean when they try real hard! I wonder if he will come here?”

“It’s hard to say,” replied Jack. “He showed spunk, though, in running away, and I guess he couldn’t have taken any money with him, either, for his guardian never let him have any. Well, if he comes I’ll look out for him, and I’ll not hand him over to a policeman, either.”

“Say,” called a voice from the other side of the street. “Bettergome, Jack.”

“Better go home—what for, Budge?” asked Jack as he saw the queer, gum-loving lad coming toward him.

“Some of your camping stuff arrived, and your aunts don’t know where to put it. It’s all over the parlor floor,” explained Budge, taking his gum out of his mouth in order to speak more plainly.

“I hope it’s my new gun!” exclaimed Jack. “Come on, Nat, let’s hurry. Did they send you after me, Budge?” for the assistant janitor used to do chores for Jack’s aunts, and was constantly around the house.

“Swat,” replied Budge, that being his gum version of “That’s what.”

Jack and Nat hurried to the former’s house. They found several packages strewn about the parlor, while Jack’s three maiden aunts were sitting in chairs, staring helplessly at the accumulation of stuff.

“Oh, Jack!” exclaimed Aunt Angelina. “Whatever is in all those packages? The man who brought them told us to be careful, as one was marked firearms.”

“That’s all right,” said Jack easily. “It’s only some guns and cartridges I expect, Aunt Angelina.”

“But—but suppose it should blow up the place, Jack dear?” asked Aunt Mary.

“Yes, and break my best set of china,” added Aunt Josephine. “Oh, Jack, take them away, please!”

“All right,” exclaimed Jack. “I’ll give you a correct imitation of Marinello Booghoobally, *alias* Hemp Smith, making things disappear. Catch hold, Nat, and we’ll take them out to our private office,” and with his chum’s aid Jack had soon removed the offending packages to a loft over the barn, which he had fitted up as a sort of clubroom.

“Now, Jack, be careful,” cautioned Mr. Ranger as he saw his son busily engaged. “You know the danger of firearms.”

“Sure, dad. Say, I wish you were going hunting with us. Why can’t you?”

“I had enough of the West,” remarked Mr. Ranger, as he thought of his enforced stay there for many years. “I’m not going back. You brought me home, Jack, and I’m going to stay East. But I hope you have a good time.”

“I guess we will, if Jack has anything to do with it,” remarked Nat. “Say, Jack, that’s a dandy gun.”

“Pretty fair,” observed our hero, as he brought to view a fine new rifle, which he had sent for.

There was also a shotgun in the outfit, and many other things to be used on the trail and in camp. Nat’s eyes showed his admiration.

“Jumping jillflowers!” he exclaimed, “but you are certainly doing this up good and brown, Jack.”

“Yes, I don’t like anything half done. It’s bad for the digestion. You’ve got a gun, haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes, a pretty fair one. But I wish I had one like yours.”

“You can use it whenever you want to,” was Jack’s generous offer. “Budge hasn’t any, and I’m going to let him take my old rifle, though I expect he’ll get the lock all stuck up with gum, so it won’t shoot.”

“I’m glad Budge is going. He’ll keep things lively.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry Bill Williams can’t go. I s’pose I’ve got to write to his guardian, and tell him I haven’t seen Bill. Well, we’re almost ready. I guess we can start in about three days.”

“When will Sam and Bony arrive?”

“I expect them to-morrow. Then we’ll make for the West, for the mountains, the bad lands, the desert, and the home of big game! Whoop! La-la! Hold me down, Nat! I’m feeling fine!”

Jack began dancing about the loft, and the loose boards of the floor made such a racket as he leaped about, pulling Nat this way and that in his enthusiasm, that Budge, who was cleaning out the stable, called up from below:

“’Sanythingwrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong, you old gum-masticating specimen of a big-horn sheep,” replied Nat. “We’re just working off some steam, that’s all.”

“Better send it back to Washington Hall,” advised Budge. “They need it there.”

“That’s right,” laughed Jack.

Sam Chalmers and Bony Balmore arrived the next day, and were entertained at Jack’s house. Preparations were rushed, Nat and Budge finishing their packing, and two days later, with their guns, their camping outfits, and their baggage, they stood in the railroad station, ready to start for the West.

It was a fine, clear, crisp November day, all traces of the recent storm having disappeared, and it seemed as if winter, having sent on an advance agent, rather repented of opening the season so early.

“It will be fine hunting weather,” said Jack as he and his chums waited for the train.

“Couldn’t be better,” agreed Nat.

At that moment the agent came hurrying from the depot, holding aloft an envelope.

“Here’s a telegram for you, Jack Ranger,” he said as he handed it over. “It just came.”

“A telegram?” mused Jack. “I wonder who it’s from?”

He tore open the envelope, and as he read the message he gave a start.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BROKEN TRAIN

“What is it?” asked Nat. “Any bad news? Can’t you go camping?”

“It’s a message from Mr. Gabel, Bill Williams’ guardian,” replied Jack. “He says he has a clue that Bill has gone out to a settlement on the Big Horn River, in Montana, and he wants me to tell him to go back to Hickville at once if I see him.”

“But you’re not likely to, are you? Is the Big Horn River near where we are going?” asked Bony.

“Not very, I guess,” answered Jack. “The Big Horn starts in Wyoming, but I rather think the chances are a thousand to one against seeing Bill. Poor chap! He has a hard row to hoe. I wish I could help him, but if he’s run away I don’t see how I can.”

“I wish we’d meet him out West,” said Sam. “Wouldn’t it be a joke if, after all, he could go camping with us and fool his mean old guardian?”

“Oh, what’s the use discussing fairy tales?” asked Jack. “Are you fellows all ready? Don’t leave anything behind, now.”

“I guess we’re all here—what there is of us,” remarked Bony, cracking his finger joints.

Just then the whistle of an approaching train was heard.

“Gotchertickets?” asked Budge Rankin, taking in a fresh wad of gum.

“Hu! Do you think I left them until now?” inquired Jack. “I’ve got all the tickets. That’s our train, fellows. Now we’ll say good-by to Denton for a while, and live in the wild and woolly West. Here, Budge, you take that satchel, and I’ll tote the dress-suit case. Try and get seats together, boys.”

A little later they were on the train and being whirled rapidly away from Denton.

They had a long journey before them, and as the first part of it contained no features of interest the lads spent all their time discussing what was before them.

“I want to get a big buck mule deer,” remarked Jack as they were talking about what kind of game they would be likely to find.

“Me for a big-horn sheep,” said Nat. “I want to get the head mounted and put it in my room. Then I’ll put my rifle across the horns, and show it to every one who comes in.”

“I s’pose you’ll tell ’em you shot it, won’t you?” asked Bony.

“Of course. I will shoot it.”

“You won’t if you haven’t improved your aim any since we were camping this summer.”

“I can shoot better than you can,” retorted Nat.

“Like pie!” exclaimed Bony, discharging a whole volley of knuckle-bone shots.

“Why, you missed that big muskrat you aimed at, the day before Jack and I were kidnapped!” taunted Nat.

“Yes, but you juggled my arm.”

“I did not.”

“You did so.”

“Hold on,” interposed Jack in a quiet voice. “All the passengers are laughing at you two.”

“I don’t care,” replied Nat. “I guess I can shoot as good as he can.”

“Oh, I fancy there’ll be game enough out there, so if you miss one thing you can hit another,” consoled Sam. “What I want to see are the bad lands. Just think of thousands of small sandstone peaks, so much alike that they look like a stone forest, with sulphur springs here and there, and all sorts of queer-shaped rocks. It must be a great sight!”

“Yes, and it’s easy to get lost among those same peaks,” added Jack. “I read of a

hunter who went out there, and he was so near camp that his friends could hear him shouting, but they couldn't locate him until he began to fire his gun, and then they had hard work because of the echoes. We'll have to keep together if we get in such a place as that."

"But there are some woods, aren't there?" asked Bony.

"Sure, woods, mountains, valleys, and all sorts of wild places," said Jack. "I fancy there'll be plenty of snow on the upper peaks, too, but it's likely to be nice and warm down below."

"What do you want to shoot, Budge?" asked Nat, for the gum-chewing youth had not said much.

"Hu! Guess a rabbit'll do me."

"A rabbit," remarked Jack. "Maybe we'll be glad of a good rabbit stew, or one roasted, in case these mighty hunters don't bring down a buck or a bear."

Thus they talked for many miles, until they had to change cars, where they took another road leading more directly West. They arrived at Chicago the morning after the day on which they had started, and spent some time in the Windy City. Then they started off again.

"Two days more and we'll be in Wyoming," remarked Jack the next afternoon, as they were speeding through Iowa. "Then for a good time. Eh, fellows?"

"That's what!" answered Sam. "My, but I'm getting stiff. I'd like to get out and have a ball game."

"So would I," said Nat.

Their train stopped at a small station, and was held there for some time.

"Wonder what we're waiting for?" ventured Jack. "What's the matter?" he asked of a brakeman who passed through their car at that moment.

"Some block on the line ahead," was the reply. "We'll go in a few minutes."

There was some fretting among the passengers at the delay, but finally the train started off again. It proceeded slowly. Then followed some sharp whistles, and

finally there sounded a report like a gun.

“It’s a hold-up!” cried an excited man.

The boys and all about them leaped to their feet in alarm.

“That’s what it is,” went on the man. “It’s a Wild West hold-up! Better hide your watches and money.”

He began emptying his pockets of his valuables, and was thrusting them under his seat.

The train had come to a sudden stop.

“Do you s’pose it’s train robbers?” asked Bony in some alarm.

“I don’t know,” answered Jack. “I guess——”

“Where’s the guns an’ we’ll shoot ‘em!” exclaimed Budge, jumping up.

Just then a brakeman ran through the car, carrying a red flag.

“What’s the matter? Is it a hold-up? Are they after our money?”

These questions were rapidly fired at him.

“A freight train has broken in two just ahead of us,” explained the railroad man. “The engine’s disabled,” he went on. “We’ve got to back up to a switch so as to pass it. I’ve got to go back with a danger flag.”

“Oh, dear!” exclaimed a woman. “But who got shot? I’m sure I heard a gun go off.”

“That was a torpedo on the track, ma’am,” explained the brakeman. “The freight crew put it there on a sharp curve, so we wouldn’t run into the tail-end of their train. It’s all right. There’s no danger.”

The brakeman hurried down the steps of the last car, in which the boys were riding, and began to run along the track. When he was about a hundred yards away the train began to back slowly up.

“I wonder how far back we have to go to reach the switch?” asked Jack.

“About two miles,” answered a man across the aisle from the lads. “It’s near Mine Brook Station, and it’ll take us quite a while to get there.”

“Why?” asked Bony. “Can’t the train go fast backward?”

“Yes, but the engineer dare not run past the man with the flag. He has to keep a certain distance in the rear of the last car, to warn any other trains that may be approaching behind us. So we really can’t back up any faster than the brakeman can run. I don’t like this delay, either, as I have an important engagement. But something always seems to be happening on this road. I wish I’d come another route.”

There were other grumbling remarks by the various passengers, but the boys were too interested in watching the brakeman to notice them. The train must have gotten too close to him, for it came to a stop, in obedience to a signal on the air whistle, and waited until the man with the red flag was out of sight around a curve. Then it began to back again.

This was kept up for some time, and finally the boys saw the brakeman come to a halt and wave his flag in a peculiar manner.

“He’s at the switch now,” remarked the man who had first spoken to the lads. “We’ll soon be on our way again.”

The train proceeded more slowly, and then the boys saw where a switch crossed from one track to another. The rear car was halted some distance from the cross-over, and a man came running up from the head end, carrying a key in his hand, with which to unlock the switch. He quickly turned it, and then began to wave his arm, as a signal for the engineer to back up. He continued to wave for several seconds, and then he exclaimed:

“He can’t see me. Hey!” he called to a group of men on the back platform of the last car, “give him the whistle signal, will you?”

“What?” asked a man.

“Give him the whistle. Blow it three times, so he’ll back up. Hurry! I can’t leave this switch.”

The men did not seem to know what to do. Some of them began looking inside

the car for the old-fashioned bell cord, that used to run through the train to the engineer's cab. This is now displaced by a small red cord at one side of the car, and it operated a whistle connected with the air-brake system.

"Pull the cord. Give him three whistles, can't you?" cried the man at the switch. "We can't lay here all day."

"I don't see any whistle," murmured the man who had told the boys about the switch. "Let him come and pull it himself. This is a queer road, where they expect the passengers to help run it."

"Can't some of you pull that whistle cord?" demanded the man. "Hurry up."

Jack heard and understood. He had often seen the brakemen or conductor at the Denton station start the trains by pulling on something under the hood of the car, as they stood on the platform.

"I guess I can do it," he said as he worked his way through the crowd of passengers about the door.

He reached up, and his fingers encountered a thin cord. He pulled it slowly, as he had seen the railroad men do, for as the air pressure had to travel the entire length of the train it required some time, and a quick jerk would not have been effective.

Once, twice, three times Jack pulled the whistle cord, and he heard the hissing of escaping air that told of the signal sounding in the locomotive cab. An instant later came three blasts from the engine, and the train began to back up.

"Much obliged to you," called the man at the switch to Jack, as the rear car passed him. "I'm glad somebody knew how to work it."

"Is that where the whistle cord is?" asked a man. "I was looking for a bell cord."

The train backed across the switch, and was soon on another track, and one not blocked by a disabled freight.

"Say," remarked Nat to Jack, "you're getting to be a regular railroad man."

"Well, I'm in a hurry to get out to camp and take the trail," replied Jack. "That's why I'm helping 'em run this road."

CHAPTER XV

JACK MEETS A GIRL

The train soon began to move forward again, but it had to proceed slowly, as it was on the wrong track, and a flagman had to precede it to prevent a collision. It was tiresome traveling, and nearly every one grumbled—that is, all save the boys. To them the affair was novel enough to be interesting.

Finally they reached and passed the disabled freight train. As they puffed past it a girl, who had come in from some car ahead with an elderly gentleman, took a seat with him just across from where Jack sat.

“There, daddy,” said the girl in a sweet, resonant voice that made Jack look up quickly, “there’s the train that made all the trouble. Now we’ll go more quickly.”

“Are you sure, Mabel?” he asked.

“Why, yes, daddy. Didn’t the conductor say that as soon as we passed the broken freight train we would get on our regular track? You heard him.”

“Yes, I know, but you can’t always believe what these railroad men tell you. They’d say anything to keep a passenger quiet. I’m nervous riding in these cars. There may be a collision when we’re on the wrong track. Don’t you think so?” he asked, turning to Jack.

“Why, no. I don’t believe we’re in any danger,” replied our hero, and his heart beat faster at the grateful look which the pretty girl flashed at him from her brown eyes. “There is a flagman ahead of us, and we’ll soon be on the right track. There is no danger.”

“I’m sure I hope so,” went on the aged man. “I’m not used to this way of traveling. A wagon, a horse, or hitting the trail for mine. I came out of the front car, because I thought it would be safer here in case of a collision. Don’t you think so?” he asked anxiously.

“Of course,” answered Jack reassuringly, and again the girl looked gratefully at him.

“My name’s Pierce,” went on the timid man. “Dan Pierce. What’s yours?”

“Oh, daddy!” exclaimed the girl. “Perhaps the young gentleman doesn’t want to tell his name.”

“Why shouldn’t he?” asked Mr. Pierce quickly. “Every one ought to be proud of his name. I’m proud of mine. Dan Pierce it is. I’m an old Western hunter, and this is my daughter Mabel. We’ve been East on a visit, and we’re going back. I’m glad of it, too. What’s your name?” he went on.

“Father,” expostulated the girl, “perhaps he doesn’t wish to tell.”

“Oh, I haven’t the least objection,” answered our hero. “I’m Jack Ranger, and these are some friends of mine.”

“I’d like to know ’em,” said Mr. Pierce quickly, and Jack introduced the boys, the old hunter, in turn, presenting his daughter Mabel, who blushed more than ever. But Jack thought her ever so much prettier when the color surged up into her brown, olive-tinted cheeks.

“Going far?” asked Mr. Pierce.

“We’re taking a hunting trip to the Shoshone Mountains,” replied Jack.

“You don’t say so? Why, that’s where I lived and hunted for forty years!” exclaimed Mr. Pierce. “That’s where me and my daughter live. About ten miles from Pryor’s Gap. But my hunting days are over,” he said a bit sadly. “I have to settle down now and live in a house with Mabel here.”

Jack thought that was not at all a bad arrangement, and he stole a glance at the girl. He caught her looking at him, and he felt the blood mounting to his face, while he saw the blush spread again over her cheeks.

“How long are you going to stay?” asked Mr. Pierce.

Then Jack told of the formation of the gun club, and how it happened that they had a chance to come West on a late fall hunting trip.

“It makes me feel young again,” declared Mr. Pierce as his eyes lighted up. “I declare, I’ve a good notion to hit the trail again.”

“Oh, you mustn’t think of that, daddy!” exclaimed Mabel. “Remember, you promised me you would stay home now and rest.”

“Rest? I guess you mean rust,” said Mr. Pierce, his deep-set eyes sparkling with fun. “I sure would like to hit the trail again.”

“We would be very glad to have you come along with us,” said Jack. “We have plenty of shelter tents, and lots of grub.”

“I’d like it—I’d like it,” said Mr. Pierce musingly.

“Daddy!” expostulated his daughter.

She shot a somewhat indignant glance at Jack for proposing such a thing, but she was not angry.

“There, there, Mabel, of course I won’t go,” said her father. “I’ll stay home. My hunting days are over, I reckon, but I sure would like a chance to wrassle with a bear or draw a bead on a mule deer or a fine big-horn sheep. Say, if you boys ever get near Pryor’s Gap I’ll feel mortal offended if you don’t stop off and see us.”

“We’ll stop,” promised Jack heartily, and he looked into Mabel’s eyes, whereat she blushed again, and Jack felt his heart strangely beating.

“Masquerading mud-turtles! but that’s a fine view!” suddenly exclaimed Nat, who was looking from a window. “You can see fifty miles, I’ll wager.”

Mabel laughed heartily.

“What a funny expression!” she said. “Where did you get it?”

“Oh, he makes them up as he goes along,” explained Jack, while Nat was in some confusion.

“It must be some tiresome,” observed Mr. Pierce, while his eyes twinkled humorously. “But we sure do have fine views out here. You needn’t be in a hurry to look at ’em. There’s plenty where you’re going. But I meant to ask you boys how do you calculate to travel after you get to Fort Custer? I believe you said you were going there first.”

“We are,” replied Jack, “and from there we have arranged to go in wagons to Sage Creek and across Forty-mile Desert.”

“That’s a good route,” observed Mr. Pierce. “Who was you depending on to tote your stuff across the desert?”

“Why, a man named Isaac Blender,” answered Jack. “I wrote to him on the advice of my father, who heard of him through some Western friends he has.”

“Oh, you mean Tanker Ike,” said Mr. Pierce.

“Tanker Ike?” repeated Jack.

“Yes. You see, we call him that because he used to drive a water tank across the desert to the mining camps. So you’re going with Tanker Ike, eh? Well, that’s middlin’ curious.”

“Why so?” asked Sam.

“Because me and my daughter are going to take a short trip with him. I’ve got a sister I want to visit before I go back to Pryor’s Gap, and Mabel and I are going in one of Tanker Ike’s wagons.”

“Maybe we can go together,” spoke Jack quickly, and he glanced at Mabel, who suddenly found something of interest in the scenery that was rushing by.

“That’s just what I was thinking,” went on Mr. Pierce. “I’ll give you a proper introduction to Ike. Are you going to have a guide?”

“Yes,” answered Jack. “I wrote to Mr. Blender about it, and he promised to get an Indian guide for us. Do you think he can?”

“Oh, yes. There are plenty of Crow Indians that can be hired. I’ll see that he gets you a good one.”

“Thank you,” said Jack, secretly delighted that he could travel for some time longer in Mabel’s company.

The rest of the railroad journey seemed very short to Jack, and to his chums also, for Mr. Pierce proved an interesting talker, and told them many stories of camp and trail.

Finally they reached Fort Custer, found their camping outfit on hand, with their guns, tents and other necessities, and there was Tanker Ike on hand to meet them.

“Hello, Ike!” called Mr. Pierce as he descended from the car.

“Well, bust my off wheel! If it ain’t Dan Pierce!” exclaimed the other. “Where did you drift in from?”

They greeted each other heartily, and then Mr. Blender approached Jack and his chums, Mr. Pierce doing the introducing, which was hardly necessary, as the man who was to pilot the boys across the desert was a hearty, genial Westerner, whom to meet once was to feel well acquainted with.

“And I want you to get these boys a good Indian guide,” said Mr. Pierce. “None of those lazy, shiftless beggars.”

“I’ve got Long Gun for them,” said Mr. Blender.

“Good!” exclaimed Mr. Pierce. “Long Gun is as good a Crow Indian as there is. You’ll be safe with him, boys.”

“Sanctimonious scalplocks!” exclaimed Nat. “Are we going to travel with a real live Indian?”

“That’s what, son,” replied Tanker Ike softly. “But don’t let off any more of them curious expressions than you can help. They might scare Long Gun, and he’s sort of timid—for an Indian,” and Mr. Pierce joined the wagon driver in a laugh.

“Well, if we’re going to start we’d better be going,” remarked Mr. Blender at length. “Let’s see. I guess I can get you all in one wagon, and pack the grub and camp truck in another.”

“Where will the Indian guide meet us?” asked Jack.

“The other side of the desert.”

“Do you think he’ll be there?”

“When Long Gun says a thing, it’s as good as done,” commented Mr. Pierce. “Well, Mabel, climb up, and I’ll get aboard in a few minutes.”

Jack made a start for the wagon.

“Where you going?” asked Nat quickly.

“I’m going to get in, of course.”

“But what about our stuff?”

“Oh, Mr. Blender will look after that, I guess.”

Jack kept on, following close after Mabel, and he took a seat beside her in the big wagon.

“Say, fellows,” remarked Nat in a low voice to the other lads, “what do you think of Jack?”

“He’s got ’em bad,” commented Sam. “But I don’t know as I blame him. She’s awful nice.”

“Cut it out! You’re getting sentimental in your old age, Sam,” objected Bony, as he cracked a couple of knuckles for practice.

CHAPTER XVI

A DANGEROUS DESCENT

Jack looked down at his chums from his seat in the big wagon beside Mabel.

“Aren’t you going to get aboard?” he asked with a smile.

“Are we going to start soon?” asked Nat.

“As soon as our stuff is loaded in the freight wagon,” replied Jack. “Why?”

“I want to get my gun,” replied Nat. “We may see something to shoot at.”

“Not much around here,” commented Mr. Pierce. “Better leave your truck all together until you get to camp. It’ll carry better that way.”

“Juthinkwe’llseeanyrobbers?” asked Budge suddenly.

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. Pierce slowly, while a look of surprise slowly spread over his face. “But what was that remark you just made?”

For Budge had not talked much, thus far on the journey, and when he had spoken he had not used any of his conglomerated remarks.

“He merely inquired if you thought we’d see any robbers,” answered Sam with a smile.

“’SwatIsaid,” added Budge, rapidly chewing gum in his excitement.

“No, I don’t cal’alate we’ll meet up with any bandits,” answered Mabel’s father with a smile. “If we do—well, Tanker Ike and I are pretty well heeled, I guess,” and he lifted from his side coat pocket, where he carried it as if it was a pound of sugar, a revolver of large size.

“Oh, daddy! Don’t bring out that horrid gun!” exclaimed Mabel.

“I thought Western girls were used to guns and such things,” remarked Jack.

“So she is,” said her father. “Mabel is as good a shot with the rifle as I am, but

somehow she don't exactly seem to cotton to these pocket pistols."

"I think they're dangerous," explained the girl with a glance at Jack that set his heart to beating faster again. "I don't mind a rifle, but for all daddy says so, I'm not as good a shot as he is."

"I'd like to see you shoot," said Jack.

"Maybe you will—if you come to see me—I mean us," she corrected herself quickly, with a blush.

"I'll come," said Jack.

Meanwhile, Mr. Blender and some men from the railroad freight office were loading the other wagon. This was one with a canvas top, something like the prairie schooners of the early Western days, and was drawn by a team of four mules. The passenger vehicle was hauled by four horses.

"Well, I guess I've got everything in," commented Tanker Ike. "Now it's up to you boys to get the game. There's plenty of it, and I expect when you come back here to take a train East you'll have a great collection."

"We'll try," answered Jack.

"All aboard!" sung out Mr. Blender, and Sam, Bony and Budge, together with Nat, who had been wandering about, looking at the view, started to climb up into the big wagon. Jack had not relinquished his seat by Mabel's side, and he was oblivious to the winks and grins of his chums.

"Have you got a good seat, Jack?" asked Sam, giving Nat a nudge in the ribs.

"I've got the best seat in the wagon," replied Jack boldly, and Mabel seemed to find something very interesting on the opposite side of the vehicle from where Jack sat at her elbow.

Mr. Pierce and Mr. Blender took their places on the front seat, the four other boys distributing themselves in the rear, while a teamster in charge of the freight wagon drove the mules that were to haul the camping outfit over the desert and mountains.

It was fine, clear weather, not cold, in spite of the lateness of the season, and the

boys, as well as all the others in the party, were in fine spirits.

“Hurrah for Jack Ranger’s gun club!” cried Nat, when they started off, the horses and mules plunging forward in response to pistol-like cracks of the long whips.

“That’s right!” sung out Sam.

“Is it your gun club?” asked Mabel.

“Well, they call it that,” explained Jack, as he told how it came to be formed.

“Cæsar’s side saddles!” suddenly exclaimed Nat, when they had gone a little farther. “Did you see that rabbit? It was as big as a dog!”

“That’s a jack-rabbit,” explained Mr. Pierce.

“Why didn’t I keep out my gun?” asked Sam with regret in his voice. “I’d like a shot at it. That’s the biggest game I’ve seen in some time.”

“Wait until you see a mule deer, or a big-horn sheep,” said Mr. Blender. “Then you can talk.”

They continued on slowly for several miles, the view changing every moment, and bringing forth exclamations of astonishment and delight from the boys. To Jack and Nat, who had been West before, there was not so much novelty in it, but Sam, Budge and Bony said they had never seen such beautiful aspects of mountain and valley.

They stopped at noon to get dinner at a stage station, and though the place was of the “rough and ready” style, the meal was good.

“‘Sanycowboys?” asked Budge of Jack, as they came out to resume their journey.

“I suppose you mean where are any cowboys,” said Jack, and Budge nodded, being too busily engaged in preparing a fresh wad of gum at that moment to answer in words.

“There aren’t many around here,” explained Mr. Pierce, who had heard Jack’s interpretation of the question. “Oh, the West isn’t half so wild and woolly as some book writers make it out to be.”

“Are you boys pretty good at going dry?” asked Tanker Ike, turning to Jack, when they had accomplished several miles more of their journey.

“Going dry?” repeated our hero.

“Yes. Can you go without a drink if you have to?”

“Why?”

“Well, you see, we’ll start to cross the desert to-morrow, and though we’ll take plenty of water along, you never can tell what will happen. It usually takes two days to make it, but sometimes an accident happens to a wagon, or a horse or a mule may go lame, and then you’re longer on the trip. When you are, your water doesn’t always last, and many a time I’ve finished the journey with my tongue hanging out of my mouth, and the poor beasts as dry as powder-horns. So I just thought I’d ask you if you were pretty good at going dry.”

“Well, Nat and I were shipwrecked once,” answered Jack, “and if it hadn’t rained we’d have been in a bad way, eh, Nat?”

“That’s what. Sanctified sand-fleas! but that was a tough time,” he added, as he thought of the cruise of the *Polly Ann*.

“Well, it never rains on this desert,” commented Mr. Pierce.

“Can’t you carry enough water so that if you’re four days instead of two crossing the desert you’ll have plenty?” asked Bony.

“You can only carry just so much,” replied Tanker Ike. “But don’t worry. I was only asking just for fun. I reckon we’ll make out all right.”

“Were you really shipwrecked?” asked Mabel, interestedly turning to Jack.

“Well, yes,” he admitted, for he disliked to talk about himself.

“Oh, do tell me about it, please. I love to hear real stories of adventure.”

“And tell her how you knocked out Jerry Chowden,” put in Sam. “Say, maybe we’ll meet him out here. He went West, you know.”

“I hope not,” responded Jack, and then he told Mabel of his ocean cruise.

“Everybody hold on tight now,” cautioned Mr. Blender about an hour later, as he set the brake of the wagon and called back a warning to the driver of the freight vehicle.

“Why?” asked Jack.

“There’s a bad hill just ahead, and I’ve got more of a load on than I usually carry. But I guess we’ll make it all right,” and he gathered the reins in a firmer grip and braced himself on the seat.

A few minutes later they came to a turn in the road, and started down a dangerous descent of the bluff that bordered the valley of the desert.

The brake began to screech on the wheels, and the horses threw themselves almost on their haunches to hold back the heavy wagon, which, in spite of the fact that two wheels were almost locked, was sliding down the declivity at a dangerous speed.

“I’d oughter chained the wheels,” said Tanker Ike grimly, as he tried to force the brake lever forward another notch.

“Can’t you do it now?” asked Mr. Pierce.

“Nope!” spoke the driver between his clenched teeth. “We’ve got to go on.”

More and more rapidly the vehicle slid down the hill. The horses were slipping, but they managed to keep their feet, and the brake was more shrilly screeching on the wheels.

All at once, as they made a turn and came to yet a steeper part of the trail, there was a sudden chill to the air, and some white flecks, as if some one had scattered tiny feathers, swirled in front of those in the wagon.

“Snow!” exclaimed Tanker Ike. “I thought it was coming.”

A moment later there was a sharp squall, and the air was filled with white crystals, which came down so thick that it was impossible to see twenty feet ahead.

“Steady, boys—steady!” called the driver to the horses, which seemed frightened by the storm and the weight of the wagon pushing them from behind.

The speed was faster now, though Tanker Ike was doing his best to have the animals hold back the wagon. The horses were almost “sitting down,” and were fairly sliding along.

Suddenly there sounded a sharp snap, and the wagon seemed to plunge forward.

“What’s that?” cried Mr. Pierce.

“Brake’s busted!” shouted Mr. Blender. “Now we’re in for it!”

He loosened his hold on the reins slightly, and swung his long whip over the heads of the astonished horses with a crack like that of a rifle.

“Go on!” he yelled. “Go on! Run!”

The steeds began to gallop, just in time to prevent the wagon, so unexpectedly released from the hold of the brake, from striking them, and they dashed down the mountain-side, dragging the vehicle after them.

CHAPTER XVII

THIRSTY ON THE DESERT

“Hold fast, everybody!” called out Tanker Ike, giving one glance backward at his passengers.

The fury of the sudden storm increased. The road became more steep, and the speed was faster.

“I hope we don’t meet any other wagon,” thought Jack. He gave one glance at the girl at his side. He could see that she was pale, but there was no sign of fear in her brown eyes. She was clinging tightly to the side of the seat, and Jack edged closer to her, hoping he might be of some service.

“Look out!” suddenly cried the driver.

An instant later Jack and his chums knew the reason why. The wagon struck a big stone in the road, and the occupants of the seats were nearly thrown off them.

Then followed a sound as of something breaking, and the next moment Jack felt the seat, on which he and the girl were, sliding forward. It had broken loose from its fastenings. Another jolt of the wagon threw the end on which Mabel sat down into the bottom of the vehicle, and she pitched sideways over the edge of the wagon, which at that moment was on a narrow part of the road, skirting a big cliff. On one side the rock rose sheer like a wall. On the other there was a precipice, dropping away for a hundred feet or more.

Mabel could not repress a scream as she felt herself tossed out of the wagon, and she threw her hands upward, vainly clutching for something to cling to. Her father turned and saw her. He prepared to leap backward to her aid, but he could not have done it.

But Jack saw what had happened. His end of the seat was elevated, as the other was depressed, and, taking in the situation at a glance, he made a spring toward the girl, and clasped her about the waist just in time to prevent her falling out.

He braced himself against the edge of the wagon, and held on with all his

strength, for the girl was no lightweight, and the swaying of the vehicle threatened to toss them both out.

By this time Mr. Pierce had left his seat beside Tanker Ike, who was doing his best to safely guide the horses down the winding, steep road in the storm, and Mabel's father came to the aid of her and Jack.

"I've got her!" Jack managed to gasp.

"So I see!" cried Mr. Pierce, and then, lending his strength to that of our hero, he pulled Mabel safely within the wagon.

"That—that was a narrow squeak," commented Mr. Pierce, when Mabel, pale and gasping from fright, had been assisted to the seat, which was replaced and braced up after a fashion.

"Rather," admitted Jack with a smile.

"You saved her life, Ranger," went on Mr. Pierce, and there was a husky note in his voice. "She's—she's all I've got, and—and—I don't know how to thank you. If she'd gone over the edge there—well, I don't like to talk about it."

"Oh, if I hadn't grabbed her some one else would," said Jack modestly.

Mabel did not say much, but the glance she gave Jack from her brown eyes more than repaid him.

The excitement caused by the second accident calmed down, and then the occupants of the wagon had time to notice that the progress of the vehicle was slower. The road was not so steep, and a little later Tanker Ike guided his horses to a comparatively level stretch. The snow squall, too, suddenly ceased.

"Well," remarked the driver slowly as he halted the team and got out to repair the broken brake, "I don't want a thing like that to happen again. I wanted to help you, Mabel, but I didn't dare leave the horses."

"I—I was helped in time," answered the girl with a little blush.

"Guess we'll wait for the freight wagon," went on Tanker Ike. "Then I'll fix things up and we'll go on. There's no more danger, though. We're over the worst part of the road."

Mexican Pete, who drove the freighter, soon came up, he having had no mishap on the trip down. The three men soon mended the broken brake, and the journey was resumed. That night they arrived at the stage station, which marked the beginning of the two days' trip over the desert. It was here that Mr. Pierce and his daughter were to leave the boys, to go on a different route.

"Now don't you young fellows forget to come to Pryor's Gap if you get a chance," commanded Mr. Pierce. "My daughter and I will be there in a few weeks, after I do a little more visiting. You can get there from where you are going to hunt without crossing this desert, though it's rather a long, roundabout way. But I hope I'll see you again."

"Yes, try to come," added Mabel as she shook hands with the boys, Jack last of all.

Was it fancy, or did she leave her hand in his a little longer than was absolutely necessary? I rather think she did, or perhaps Jack held it.

"I hope you'll come to see me—I mean us," she said.

"I'll come," was Jack's answer.

Mr. Pierce and his pretty daughter went to stay with a friend that night, while the boys, Tanker Ike and Mexican Pete put up at the stage hotel.

"We'll start early in the morning," said Mr. Blender as the boys were getting ready to retire. "I'll see to filling the water tanks, and the grub you ordered in advance is here. I'll stack it in the wagon, and we'll start off as soon as it's daylight. I've got good horses for us all."

"Horses? Are we going to ride horses?" asked Sam.

"Of course, from now on," replied Jack. "Didn't I tell you?"

"There's so much about this trip, I guess if you did tell us we'd forget some of it," said Bony. "But traveling on horses will be sport. I wish it was morning. Don't you, Budge?"

"I'm hungry," was the queer lad's reply.

"Hungry?" remarked Jack. "Didn't you eat enough supper?"

“I guess it must be this Western air,” put in Nat. “Salubrious centipedes! but I could eat a bit myself. I wish we had some of that last spread you gave, Jack.”

Then, though it was almost bedtime, the boys went to the dining-room, where they bribed the only waiter to set them out some pie, cheese and glasses of milk, on which they regaled themselves.

Meanwhile, Mr. Blender and Mexican Pete had loaded the freight wagon, which was to start off ahead of the travelers, who were to go on horseback. They would catch up with the vehicle at noon, and have dinner in the shade of it.

Jack aroused his companions next morning, when there was only a faint light in the east.

“It’s time to start,” he said.

“How is it you’re dressed?” asked Sam suspiciously.

“Oh, I—er—I was up a little earlier,” replied Jack.

“Say, I know where he was,” commented Bony, cracking his knuckles in the semi-darkness. “He was off to bid Mabel good-by again. I heard him say last night he’d come over before the start of the stage she was to take.”

“Masticated mushrooms!” exclaimed Nat. “I wouldn’t have thought it of you, Jack!”

“Come on, get up!” was all Jack replied as he hurried from the room to see if Tanker Ike had everything prepared.

The boys, after a hasty breakfast, found the horses in readiness for them. They had taken out the night before their guns and some clothes from the bundles shipped from the East, and now were equipped to take the trail and begin hunting.

They started off some time before the sun shone above the horizon, and almost immediately found themselves upon a bare and partly sandy waste.

“This is Forty-mile desert,” explained Ike. “If you have any trouble at all, it’ll be here. But I hope we won’t have any.”

It was warm, in spite of the lateness of the season, and as they jogged along on their horses they began to feel the discomfiture of the journey. But no one minded it.

“We ought to come up with Mexican Pete soon,” remarked Ike, when they had trotted along for several miles. “That looks like the wagon over there,” he added, pointing ahead. Jack and his chums could make out a white speck on the trackless waste. As they approached it grew larger, until it evolved itself into the freight wagon.

They halted at it for a meal, and, resting the horses, gave Pete a chance to get some distance ahead of them. Then they resumed their jaunt. It was the middle of the afternoon when Ike, who was in the lead, made a sudden exclamation.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jack.

“Mexican Pete’s just ahead,” replied the old plainsman with a worried accent in his voice. “I wonder what he’s stopping for? I told him not to halt until we reached Stinking Spring, where we are to camp for the night.”

“Maybe something’s happened,” suggested Bony.

“I hope not, but it looks so.”

A moment later Tanker Ike had leaped from his horse, and was examining something on the ground. It looked like a small streak of darker sand than any which surrounded it.

“His water tank has sprung a leak!” he exclaimed. “You can see where it’s been running out. That’s why he’s halted to wait for us. Come on, boys; let’s hurry up. I can see trouble ahead.”

They soon reached the driver of the freight wagon. He met them with a rueful face.

“Water mos’ gone,” he said.

Tanker Ike made a hasty examination. There was only a small quantity left in the second tank, the full one, which had not yet been drawn upon, being completely empty, from a leak that had sprung in the bottom.

“Well, this is tough luck, boys,” commented the plainsman. “I don’t know what to do. We’re bound to be up against it bad whatever we do. We haven’t hardly enough water to last us going back for a fresh supply, and if we keep on we’ll be awful dry by to-morrow night. I don’t like to waste time going back, either.”

“Didn’t you say something about Stinking Spring?” asked Jack. “Can’t we get water there?”

“Yes, but neither man nor beast can drink it. It’s filled with some kind of vile-smelling chemical, and it gives off a gas so deadly that at times it will kill animals that come too close. I’ve even seen a big bear killed by it. No, we can’t get water there.”

“Then what can we do?” asked Sam.

He and the other boys were alarmed by the accident, the most serious that had yet befallen them.

“Well, the only thing I see is for us to keep on,” replied Ike. “If we travel all to-night and keep up a pretty good pace to-morrow, we may strike the Shoshone River in time to—well, in time to wet our whistles. But it’s going to be a hard pull, and I don’t know whether the horses will stand it.”

“Let’s try,” suggested Jack, who never believed in giving up in the face of difficulties.

“That’s the way to talk!” commented Ike. “Maybe we can do it.”

They halted for a short rest, then resumed the journey again. But this time they kept with the freight wagon, and they had to travel more slowly to accommodate the pace of the horses to the slower gait of the mules drawing the heavy vehicle.

They made a light supper, and drank sparingly of the little water that remained, doling out the smallest possible quantity to the horses and mules, which greedily thrust their tongues even against the wet sides of the pails, after all the fluid was sucked up.

“Now for the night journey,” said Tanker Ike, and they started off, with the moon shining from a clear sky.

It was a trip that would have been wonderfully interesting to the boys had there

not been the worry about the water. As it was, they enjoyed it at first, for in the cool, moon-lit darkness they did not suffer from thirst. But when daylight came, and the sun began to mount into the heavens, pouring down considerable heat on them, their tortures began.

Tanker Ike served out the water with sparing hand. The animals were given barely enough to wet their parched mouths, and the boys and two men got but little more. They made all the speed they could, which was not much, for the wagon held them back.

“Don’t eat much,” cautioned Ike as they stopped for a mid-day lunch. “You’ll not be so thirsty then.”

But even refraining from food did not seem to make much difference, and as the day wore on and the supply of water became lower and lower, with a consequent reduction of the ration, the sufferings of the boys grew acute.

“Oh, for a good glass of ice water,” sighed Bony.

“Dry up!” commanded Nat.

“I can’t be any drier than I am now,” responded the bony lad.

Meanwhile, Tanker Ike had been anxiously scanning the horizon. He appeared worried, and Jack, seeing this, asked him:

“Do you think we ought to be at the river now?”

“We ought to, yes, but we’re not,” was his answer. “I’m afraid I’ve gotten off the trail. I don’t see any familiar landmarks, yet I was sure I took the right route.”

He called a halt and consulted with Mexican Pete. That individual was of the same opinion as Ike—that they were on the wrong trail.

“Well, there’s no help for it,” said the plainsman. “We’ll have to go back a ways. I’m sorry, boys. It’s my fault. It’s the first time I ever did a thing like that.”

“Oh, mistakes will happen,” said Jack, and he tried to speak cheerfully, but his voice was husky and his throat was parched.

They turned around, the horses seeming unwilling to retrace their steps, and they

were beginning to get restive, as were the mules.

“The last of the water,” announced Tanker Ike at dusk that evening, when they halted for a short meal. “We’ll have to push on with all speed to-night. If we don’t find water in the morning——”

He did not finish, but they all knew what he meant.

That night was one of fearful length, it seemed. As it wore on, and the parched throats of the travelers called for water where there was none, it became a torture.

Morning came, and the sun blazed down hotter than ever. The horses and mules acted as if crazed, but they were urged on relentlessly. The tongues of Jack and his comrades began to get thick in their mouths. Those of the animals were hanging out, and foam was falling from their lips where the bits chafed.

At noon, though Tanker Ike strained his eyes for a sight of the Shoshone River or for some water hole, there was no sign of either. On and on they pushed, trying to swallow to relieve their terrible thirst.

Suddenly the horse which Sam rode gave a leap forward, and then began to go around in a circle.

“That’s bad,” murmured Ike in a low voice. “He’s beginning to get locoed from want of water.”

He urged his own beast up to Sam’s, and gave the whirling animal a cut with the quirt. That stopped it for a while, and they went on.

Mexican Pete and Tanker Ike said little. They were men used to the hardships of the West, and it was not the first time they had suffered in crossing the desert. But it was hard for Jack and his chums. Nevertheless, they did not complain, but taking an example from the men, silently rode their horses. The poor beasts must have suffered dreadfully.

Tanker Ike, who was riding ahead, suddenly leaped off his horse. At first the boys thought he had seen a water hole, but he merely picked up some pebbles from the sand.

“Put some of these in your mouth and roll them around,” he said. “It will help to

make the saliva come and keep down your thirst some.”

Mexican Pete followed his example, and the boys were about to do likewise, when Budge Rankin, reaching into his pocket, called out:

“What’s matter with this?”

And he held out several packages.

CHAPTER XVIII

LOST IN THE BAD LANDS

“Gum!” cried Jack. “Gum! That’s the stuff, Budge!”

“The very thing!” added Tanker Ike. “I wonder I didn’t think to ask for some. That will be better than the pebbles. Pass it around, young man.”

Budge handed out packages of gum, which he was seldom without, and soon all the travelers were busily engaged in chewing it. In a measure it relieved their thirst at once, and their tongues felt less swollen, and not so much like pieces of leather.

“Stoobad,” remarked Budge as he put in a fresh wad.

“What is?” asked Jack.

“That the horses can’t chew,” replied Budge.

“Hu! I guess it would take a bigger cud than you could muster to satisfy a horse—or a mule,” remarked Tanker Ike. “But it’s lucky you had it for us. I was feeling pretty bad.”

The little diversion caused by the production of the gum and the relief it brought, helped them to pass over several miles in a comfortable fashion. But the terrible thirst did not leave them, and as for the horses and mules, they were half crazed, or “locoed,” as Tanker Ike expressed it.

How they traveled the remainder of that day none of them could tell exactly afterward. But they managed to keep on, and just as it was beginning to get dusk there was a sudden movement among the animals.

“They smell water,” cried Ike as the mules, drawing the heavy wagon, broke into a run. “They smell water! They do, for sure!”

And he was right. Half an hour later they came to a small water hole, and here they slaked their thirst, drinking slowly at first, and keeping the animals back

from it by main force, until they had each been given a pailful, which they drank greedily. Then, after the life-giving fluid had had a chance to take off the first pangs of thirst, boys, men and horses drank more freely.

“Petrified persimmons!” exclaimed Nat. “I used to think ice-cream sodas were the best ever, but now I think a cupful of water from a mud hole is the finest thing that ever came over the pike. Let’s have another, boys!”

Their sufferings were at an end, and, their thirsts having been slaked, they ate a good meal and rested that night beside the water hole.

The next day they reached the Shoshone River and the end of the desert.

“Well, boys, now I’m going to leave you,” said Tanker Ike. “Long Gun will be here pretty soon, and he’ll show you where to get some big game. Then you’ll have to sort of shift for yourselves. Mexican Pete will take your camp stuff wherever you tell him to, and the rest depends on you.”

“Oh, I guess we’ll make out all right,” replied Jack.

“But what about that Indian, Long Gun?” asked Sam. “I thought he was to meet us here.”

“He will,” replied Tanker Ike confidently, and, sure enough, about an hour later there sauntered into the camp a tall, silent Indian guide, who, as he advanced to the fire, uttered but one word:

“How?”

“How?” responded the plainsman, and then he introduced the boys.

Long Gun merely grunted his salutations, and then seating himself near the fire, he took out his pipe and began to smoke.

“I wonder why he doesn’t pass it around,” whispered Nat to Jack.

“Pass what around?”

“His pipe? Isn’t that a peace pipe? I thought Indians always smoked the pipe of peace with their friends.”

Long Gun must have had good ears, for he looked up at Nat’s words. Then he

smiled grimly.

“No peace pipe. Corn-cob pipe—plenty bad, too,” he said. “Yo’ got better one?”

“No, Long Gun, they don’t use pipes,” said Tanker Ike with a smile.

“Say, he understands English,” remarked Sam.

“That’s what,” put in Bony.

“Pity he wouldn’t,” remarked Ike. “He’s been guiding hunting parties of white men for the last ten years.”

Early the next morning Tanker Ike started back, taking a longer trail, that would not make it necessary for him to cross the desert. On the advice of Long Gun the boys and Mexican Pete started off up into the mountains, where they were to make a camp, and begin to hunt.

“Here good place,” remarked Long Gun that afternoon, as they came to a level clearing on the shoulder of the mountain. “Plenty much mule deer and sheep here. Like um jack-rabbits, or um bear? Plenty git here. We camp.”

“Hu! Good!” grunted Mexican Pete, and he began to unload the wagon. In a short time all the things Jack and the other boys had brought were on the ground, beside the two tents that formed part of their outfit.

“At last it begins to look like camping,” remarked Bony.

“It’ll look a good deal more like it if you’ll give us a correct imitation of a fellow helping put up a tent,” said Jack. “Every one get busy, now.”

Mexican Pete started back with the freight wagon, agreeing to come and get the camp stuff whenever word was sent to Tanker Ike or him.

They pitched in with a will, Budge helping to good advantage, and soon the canvas shelters were up, a fire built, and, under Jack’s direction, a meal was in progress, Long Gun volunteering to oversee this.

It was no novelty for the boys to sleep in a tent at camp, but as the night advanced they found that it was far from being summer, in spite of the hot days, and they were glad of heavy clothing and the blankets which they had brought

along.

“Now for a hunt!” cried Jack the next morning, after a fine, hot breakfast. “Long Gun, I want to get a big mule deer.”

“I want a bear!” cried Sam.

“A big-horn sheep for mine!” was Nat’s stipulation.

“I’d like a mountain lion,” remarked Bony.

“How about you, Budge?” asked Jack.

“’FIkillanelkI’llbesatisfied,” was the answer.

“An elk!” exclaimed Jack. “I guess so! Why, I’d like that myself.”

“Well, I thought I might as well wish for something big while I was at it,” said Budge calmly, as he stowed away some fresh gum.

Under the guidance of Long Gun they mounted their horses and started out for their first hunt in that region. The Indian gave them some good advice about how to shoot, for going after big game was something new to them.

“If git lost, fire gun,” was the Indian’s final word of caution.

They rode on together for a mile or more, but got no sight of any game.

“I think we’d better separate,” suggested Jack. “We’ll never get anything if we stick together. Let’s try it alone. We can meet at some central point. Eh, Long Gun?”

“Hu!” grunted the Indian. “Git lost, maybe.”

“That’s right,” assented Bony. “I don’t want to go off alone.”

“Well, Nat and I will strike off to the left,” went on Jack. “You, Sam and Budge can keep with Long Gun and go to the right. We’ll meet by that big peak over there,” and he pointed to one that could easily be seen.

This was agreed to, the Indian giving his consent with a grunt, and then Jack and Nat started off alone.

“I hope we get something,” remarked Jack when they had traveled for a mile or more.

“Same here,” added Nat. “Let’s go closer to that bad lands section Long Gun told us of.”

“I’m afraid we’ll get lost,” objected Jack.

The bad lands, as they are called, are a peculiar tract covered with ten thousand little sawtooth peaks and cones of earth and sandstone, rising abruptly from the plain, and so closely set together, and so lacking in any distinctive objects to mark them, that one can wander about in them as in a maze. The two lads had been hunting on the edge of them, but had not ventured in.

“Oh, I guess we can find our way back, if we don’t go in too far,” said Nat.

“Well,” began Jack a little doubtfully, “I don’t know——” And then he saw something that made him change his mind.

“Look!” he whispered to Nat, and his chum, looking where Jack pointed, saw a big deer, just on the edge of the bad lands, and about to enter them.

“It’s a buck!” exclaimed Nat, bringing his rifle around.

“We’ll follow him and get a shot,” decided Jack, and they left their horses and began to stalk the big buck. Fortunately the wind was blowing from him to them, or the animal might have taken fright. As it was, they were not far behind him when he entered the maze of little peaks.

Several times they thought they were in a position to get a good shot, but each time the deer moved just as one or the other of the lads was drawing a bead on him.

Finally Jack got just the chance he wanted. Kneeling down he took quick aim and pulled the trigger. The report that followed nearly deafened him and Nat, so many were the echoes, but when the smoke cleared away they saw the big deer lying on the ground not far away.

“KNEELING DOWN, HE TOOK QUICK AIM AND PULLED THE TRIGGER.”

“You’ve got him!” cried Nat.

“Our first big game!” exclaimed Jack as he ran forward.

“My, but he’s big!” commented Nat. “How we going back to camp?”

“Put him on the horses, of course,” said Jack. “We can do it. We’ll lead them up here.”

“Sure,” responded Nat. “I forgot we had ’em. We’ll go back and lead ’em in.”

They started back, full of confidence in their ability to find where they had tethered the animals. They walked on for half an hour, and then Jack said:

“Say, it seems to me we’re a long time finding those horses.”

“That’s right,” agreed Nat. “We didn’t take so long coming in here. I guess we came the wrong way.”

“I’m sure of it,” declared Jack. “We should have gone to the right.”

“No, the left.”

They discussed it for some time, and finally decided to try the right. They went on for some distance, but no horses were seen.

“Let’s go back to where we left the deer and begin over,” proposed Jack.

They started, but the sawtooth peaks seemed to multiply. They turned this way and that, but could not find the place where they had made their first kill.

“Jack,” said Nat at length, “do you know it’s getting late?”

“It sure is,” admitted his chum.

The sun was low in the western sky. The two boys stared about them. On every side were the peculiar peaks of the bad lands. Jack turned around in a circle. He was trying to see some landmark, by which he could tell whether they had passed that spot before. He saw none.

“Nat,” he said finally, “we’re lost.”

CHAPTER XIX

A PERILOUS SLIDE

For a few seconds after Jack's announcement Nat stared at his chum.

"Lost?" he repeated.

"That's what I said, Nat. Long Gun was right, and so was Tanker Ike. It's a heap sight easier to get lost in here than I thought. Why, every one of these peaks looks just like the one next to it. I don't believe we've been over the same bit of ground twice."

"I know how we can tell."

"How?"

"Make a mark on one of these peaks, and then walk around and see if we get back to it."

"That's a good way, but in which direction shall we go?"

Nat shrugged his shoulders.

"You've got me," he admitted. "But, say, didn't we come into this bad section from the east when we were after the deer?"

"Yes," said Jack after a little thought, "I believe we did. I know when we were eating lunch I noted the sun. We sure did come in from the east. But what of that?"

"Why, if we want to go back we must walk toward the east. That is, have the sun at our backs. Instead of that we've been walking with the sun in our faces most of the time. Let's try it."

"All right, but first let's make a mark on one of these peaks."

They did so by digging out a hollow with their hunting knives, and placing some stones in it. This accomplished, they started off again.

“What about the deer you shot?” asked Nat.

“We’ll not try to get back to that. Make for camp is what I say. Long Gun will probably be able to find the deer.”

It was getting quite late now, and the sun was barely visible from over the peaks of the bad lands. But turning their backs to it they started off. They did not know how far they went, but it was getting dusk rapidly, and they saw no indication that they were getting nearer to the edge of the curious region in which they were lost.

“Well?” asked Nat dejectedly as he sat down on a stone. “How about it?”

“We don’t seem to be getting any closer to camp,” admitted Jack. “Say!” he exclaimed, “why didn’t we think of it before? We ought to yell.”

“Yes, and fire our rifles,” added Nat. “That’s what Long Gun told us to do if we got lost. Queer we didn’t think of it long ago. Well, here goes!”

He raised his voice in a loud shout, and Jack joined in. They called several times, but the echoes seemed to be their only answer.

“Now let’s fire a few shots,” proposed Jack, and they discharged their weapons together, making a terrible din, and causing so many echoes that it seemed as if a thunderstorm was in progress.

“I believe those echoes will confuse them,” said Nat. “I know they would me.”

“I guess Long Gun can tell where we are if he hears ’em at all,” replied Jack. “But I think we’re quite a way from camp. I wish we’d stuck together.”

“Too late for that now. Fire again.”

They did so, and also shouted a number of times, moving about in the interval.

“Well,” said Nat at length as he noted the shadows growing longer and longer, “I guess we’re in for the night; and it’s getting colder, too.”

“You’re right, there,” answered Jack, turning up the collar of his coat. “Still there’s one consolation.”

“What’s that?”

“We haven’t gone in a circle. We haven’t seen anything of that peak we marked.”

“No; but it will soon be so dark we can’t see anything.”

The two lads gazed at each other. Their plight was a serious one, for they were in no condition to remain out in the cold night without shelter.

All at once, from somewhere off to the left, there came a curious noise. It startled the lads, and Nat exclaimed:

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” answered Jack. “Some sort of an animal,” and in spite of himself he felt the cold chills running down his spine.

“Maybe it’s a bear,” suggested Nat. “I wish——”

The noise came again, louder than before, and closer.

Jack burst into a laugh.

“Aren’t we the ninnies?” he exclaimed. “Those are our horses whinnying, and the echoes made their calls sound strange. Now we’re all right, Nat. We’ll find the horses and ride right to camp.”

“My! but that’s good news!” responded his companion.

Once more came the whinnying, and following the direction of the sound, the lads soon came to their horses, but, to their surprise, the steeds were standing in among the sawtooth peaks of the bad lands.

“Didn’t we leave them outside, on the edge of this pestiferous region?” asked Nat in some doubt.

“We sure did,” replied Jack, “but they’ve pulled up the tether pegs and followed us in. Never mind, they can probably find their way out. We’ll mount them and let them take us back to camp.”

With hearts very much lighter, the two lads leaped into the saddle, and calling to the horses, let the reins lie lightly on their necks, trusting to the superior intelligence of the beasts to extricate them from their plight.

As if only waiting for their masters, the horses started off. It was almost dark now, and one or two early stars could be seen.

“Ho! for camp, and a good, hot supper!” exclaimed Jack.

“Jumping Johnniecakes! but you’re right!” cried Nat with something of his old enthusiasm. “I don’t believe I ever was so hungry.”

The horses walked at a fast pace, and seemed to have no hesitation in making their way out of the bad lands.

“Next time I’ll ride my horse in,” said Jack. “I didn’t think it was good footing, or I’d have done it to-day.”

They rode on for some time longer, and then Nat remarked:

“Seems to me it’s taking quite a long while to get out of this place. The horses must have come in quite a distance.”

“Maybe they did,” agreed Jack, “or maybe they’re taking us out on the other side. I don’t know as it makes much difference.”

“Well, we’re going up hill, anyhow,” went on Nat. “It’s quite a grade.”

It certainly was, and the horses were having no easy task. But they kept on, as if they knew just where they were going.

The boys were beginning to get a bit anxious again, wondering if, after all, the horses were taking them right, when the bad lands came to a sudden end. There were no more of the sawtooth peaks.

“Hurrah, we’re out of ’em!” cried Jack.

“Yes, and look where we are,” said Jack. “Nowhere near camp.”

They were on the shoulder of a steep mountain, while below them, wrapped in the fast approaching night, was a great valley. Then something else caught the eyes of the boys.

“There’s a fire!” called Nat, pointing to a blaze at the foot of the mountain.

“I’ll wager it’s our camp,” declared Jack. “Here goes for a hail.”

He shouted and fired his gun. In a few seconds there came an answering call, and a firebrand was waved in the air.

“That’s Bony’s voice,” cried Nat. “I can almost hear him cracking his knuckle bones.”

“Yes, but how are we to get down?” asked Jack. “I don’t see the sign of a trail.”

The next instant his horse answered the question for him by starting right down the side of the mountain, which at that point was composed of shaling stones, and quite smooth.

“Where you going?” cried Nat.

“I don’t know,” answered Jack. “My horse seems to want to take a slide.”

Then Nat’s steed followed the other, and a moment later the two lads, on the backs of their animals, were sliding, stumbling and slipping down the precipitous slope of the mountain.

CHAPTER XX

LONG GUN IS AFRAID

From below them Jack and Nat could hear cries of alarm, and they could see several waving firebrands and note ghostly figures circling about the camp blaze.

“Can you stop your horse, Jack?” called Nat.

“I’m not going to try,” was the reply. “I’ve got all I can do to hold on. How about you?”

“I’m in the same boat. I hope we don’t strike anything, for if we do I’ll shoot over his head and land I don’t know where. This is fierce!”

“Hold on tight!”

“That’s what I’m doing!”

The horses reached a place that was not quite so steep, and managed to stop sliding, running for a short distance. Then the slipping began again, but both animals were like cats on their feet, and seemed to take it all as a matter of course.

“We’re almost there!” cried Jack as he saw the camp fire more plainly, and could distinguish Sam’s and Bony’s voices calling to them.

“I’m—glad—of—that,” replied Ned brokenly, for he was bounding up and down in the saddle.

A minute later and the horses had come to a stop on the level ground where the camp was pitched.

“Sanyoneurt?” asked Budge anxiously.

“No, I guess neither of us is hurt,” answered Jack, “though we’re some shaken up.”

“Where in the world have you been?” asked Bony.

“What did you come down that way for?” was Sam’s question.

“Were you lost?” inquired Budge.

“Heap long time gone,” was Long Gun’s contribution.

“Say, if you’ll give us a chance we’ll tell you,” said Jack. “I wonder if the horses are hurt, though? I never expected to get down with them alive.”

“Horses plenty much all right,” announced the Indian after a short examination. “They do that afore. Slide down mountain many times. Know how—easy.”

“Well, I’m glad they knew how,” spoke Nat. “I thought it was an accident.”

Then Jack told of the shooting of the deer, how they were lost in the bad lands, and how they found the horses and slid down to the camp fire.

Long Gun, in his broken English, explained that the horses which they had were often used by hunters, who thought nothing of sliding down a favorable place in the side of the mountain on the backs of their steeds. Jack’s and Nat’s animals had probably thought that their riders desired to come down that way, as it was the shortest route to camp and supper.

“Well, you certainly had us worried,” said Sam as the two wanderers were seated before the fire, eating a late meal. “We could hear your guns, but the echoes confused us. Long Gun said you’d be all right, but if you hadn’t come pretty soon Bony and I were going after you.”

“Say, what about our deer, that you shot, Jack?” asked Nat a little later. “Can’t we go get it?”

“Not to-night,” replied Jack. “I wouldn’t venture in among those peaks in the dark for ten deer. We’ll get it in the morning.”

“Hu! Mebbby none left,” grunted the Indian.

“None left? What do you mean?”

“Plenty things eat um. Bears, rats, foxes, mebbby.”

“Well, we’ll have to shoot another, that’s all,” said Jack. “But did you fellows have any luck?”

“Bony shot a jack-rabbit,” replied Sam, “but the rest of us didn’t get anything, though I fired at a big sheep.”

“Too far off,” explained Long Gun.

It was getting colder, and there was a promise of snow in the air, which, the Indian explained, would make it all the better for tracking game. The boys were glad to wrap themselves up well when they went to their beds, which consisted of heavy blankets spread over hemlock boughs, placed inside the tent on the ground. A big camp fire was kept going, with enough wood at hand, so that if any one awakened in the night and found it low the fuel could easily be thrown on.

The whole party, with Long Gun included, left after breakfast to bring in the deer Jack had shot. They found it without any trouble under Long Gun’s guidance, but the carcass had been so torn by other beasts that it was not fit for food.

“Rambunctious ram’s horns!” exclaimed Nat. “I was counting on some nice venison steaks, too.”

“Well, we’ll try again,” suggested Jack, and the whole party, on horseback, started off to hunt.

This time they did not go into the region of the bad lands, but to an easy slope of the mountain, well wooded, yet with rocky precipices here and there, with bare spots where, the Indian said, the big-horn sheep might be found.

On Long Gun’s advice the party separated, Jack, Nat and Budge going off to one side, and the others in a different direction. As there was a plain trail back to camp, and plenty of landmarks, there was no danger of any one getting lost.

Jack, Nat and Budge rode along, watching for signs of game, but all they saw were numbers of jack-rabbits.

“Shall I shoot ’em?” asked Budge, as a particularly large one dashed by.

“If you want to,” replied Jack. “But I’m going to wait for bigger game. A buck or a ram for mine, eh, Nat?”

“That’s what.”

But the bucks and the rams did not seem to be on view that day, and after riding about all the morning the three boys stopped to rest near a spring and eat their lunch.

“I tell you what we’ll do,” suggested Jack as they prepared to resume their journey. “Let’s leave the horses here and work up that mountain,” and he pointed to the steep sides of a towering peak, at the foot of which they had halted.

“I’m with you,” agreed Nat.

“Stoomuchwork,” announced Budge as he turned over on his back and began chewing some fresh gum. “I’ll stay here until you come back.”

They tried to get him to come with them, but he would not, so Jack and Nat started off alone. They had not gone more than a mile before Jack, who was slightly in advance, came to a sudden halt and motioned to Nat to make no noise.

“There he is,” whispered Jack, when Nat had joined him, and he pointed to a distant boulder that jutted out from the side of the mountain, a short distance away.

Nat looked, and saw something that made the blood leap in his veins. It was a big mountain ram, with a massive pair of horns—a fine specimen. The animal’s back was toward them, and it seemed to be viewing the valley spread out below it.

“You shoot first, and if you miss I’ll take him,” directed Jack in a whisper, wishing to give his chum the first chance.

Fixing his eyes on the ram, Nat brought forward his gun, cocked it, and aimed. Then for some unaccountable reason his hand began to tremble. It was his first shot at big game, and he was nervous.

“I—I can’t shoot,” he whispered, lowering his rifle.

“Nonsense! You’ve got to,” said Jack sternly, and this brought Nat to himself. Once more he raised his weapon. Jack was in readiness with his in case his chum should miss.

There was a moment of breathless suspense, and then Nat fired. Instantly the ram wheeled about and stood facing the spot where the two lads were. He must

have seen them, for the floating cloud of smoke drew his gaze.

“I’ve missed! You fire!” exclaimed Nat.

And, indeed, he had missed the ram cleanly. Jack threw his gun to his shoulder, and instantly it cracked out.

“You hit him! I saw him jump!” cried Nat excitedly. “Come on! We’ll get him!”

Without a word Jack pumped another cartridge into the chamber, and fired again. But just as he did so the ram gave a leap and disappeared from the rock.

“We’ve got him! We’ve got him!” yelled Nat excitedly. “Come on!”

“No use,” said Jack quietly, placing a restraining hand on Nat’s arm.

“No use? Why?”

Jack pointed to a bare spot below the rock and some distance to the right. Along it the ram was running at full speed.

“Guess I only grazed him,” he said. “He isn’t hurt much when he can run like that.”

“Side-splitting sandpaper!” exclaimed Nat. “That’s tough luck. Why did I miss?”

“That’s nothing. I missed him, too. We can’t hit everything we aim at, or it wouldn’t be any fun—especially for the animals.”

“Let’s trail him,” proposed Nat.

“No, it’s too late. We’d better get back to camp.”

They found Budge with the horses, and the gum-chewing lad did not appear to have moved, but three big dead jack-rabbits at his side showed that he had not been idle.

“Well, you had some luck,” observed Jack.

“Stoeeasy—killin’ them,” remarked Budge. “They are almost tame.”

“Well, they’ll make good eating,” observed Nat. “I hope the others did better than we did.”

And when they were back at camp, which Long Gun, Sam and Bony reached shortly after they did, they found that Sam had killed a fine deer, and Bony a small sheep, which gave them plenty of fresh meat.

It was very dark that night, for it was cloudy, and the moon and stars were obscured. Outside the circle of light from the camp fire, there was blackness so deep that it seemed like a wall of ebony.

“I’d hate to be lost out there,” observed Bony, motioning toward the dark valley as he prepared to turn in with the others.

“Yes, it wouldn’t be very pleasant,” admitted Jack. “I wish we could——”

He stopped suddenly. From the black void above them there came a peculiar sound. It was like the blowing of a wind, that sighs and moans in the pine trees, but there was no wind blowing. Then it was like the rush of some mighty wings, while there sounded a deep throbbing, and all in camp were conscious of some large object passing close over their heads, but they could see nothing.

The boys stared at each other in wonder, not unmixed with fright.

“Are there any big eagles around here?” asked Jack, quickly turning to Long Gun.

But the Indian did not seem to hear. He was staring up into the black sky.

The noise passed on, the throbbing becoming fainter.

Then Long Gun cried out:

“Great spirit! Danger come! Bad luck!”

With a howl that did more to frighten the boys than had the mysterious sound, the Indian made a dive for the tent, and hid himself under his blankets.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEADLY GAS

Long Gun's example and his fright were contagious, to a certain degree. Seeing him run, Bony and Sam turned also, for they thought the Indian heard or recognized some danger. Then, as the noise ceased, they stopped in their progress toward the tent.

"What in the world do you suppose that was?" asked Sam.

"You've got me," was Bony's answer, while, in his excitement, he cracked his knuckles on the double-quick. "What do you think it was, Jack?"

"Blessed if I know. It sounded like a big bird, or, maybe, a whole lot of them. But Long Gun wouldn't be frightened of some birds, even if they were eagles."

"Let's ask him," suggested Nat.

They went into the tent, which was illuminated by a couple of lanterns, and found Long Gun groveling among his blankets.

"What was that, Long Gun?" asked Jack.

The Indian murmured something in his own tongue.

"Were they birds?" went on Jack. "What's the matter with you?"

"Long Gun 'fraid," was the reply. "No like sound in dark night. Long Gun 'fraid."

"But what sound was it?" persisted Jack.

"Dunno. Great Spirit, mebbly. Bad sound. Trouble come."

"That's all nonsense," said Jack, as he saw that his chums looked worried. "It was probably the wind."

"But there isn't any wind," declared Nat. "It's as still as can be."

“Maybe there is a wind in the upper currents of air,” suggested Jack. “You must remember we’re among the mountains, and the air is different here.”

“It isn’t different enough to make a noise like that,” was Sam’s opinion.

“That’s right,” agreed Bony.

“Juthinkitwasacyclone?” asked Budge, all in one word.

“A cyclone?” repeated Jack. “They don’t have cyclones in the mountains. No, I think it was birds.”

“No birds,” declared Long Gun suddenly. “Birds not got wings go that way.”

“That’s right, it didn’t sound like birds’ wings,” said Nat.

They discussed the mysterious happening for some time further, but could arrive at no solution of it. Jack and Nat went out to look and listen, but they could see nothing, of course, and the night seemed very silent. As for Long Gun, he could not be induced to come outside the tent.

The boys passed rather an uneasy night, but fatigue finally made them sleep, in spite of their alarm, and they slumbered so soundly toward morning that no one awoke to replenish the camp fire, which went out.

“Well, we’re all here and alive, at any rate,” remarked Jack as he looked around on coming out of the tent for a wash.

“Snapping sand-bars! but it’s cold!” cried Nat, rubbing his benumbed fingers and threshing his arms about. “Hi! Long Gun, are you so afraid of the mysterious noise that you can’t build a fire?”

“Hu!” grunted the Indian as he came from the tent, but he speedily had a genial blaze going, and breakfast in preparation.

“Well, now for some more hunting,” said Jack when the camp had been put in order. “Nat and I want to get that ram we missed yesterday.”

“And I want to land a big buck mule deer that I think I hit, but not hard enough,” said Sam.

They started off, and were gone all day, sometimes hunting together, and, again,

separating for a few miles. But they had no luck, though Jack got an opportunity for a couple of fine shots, missing both of them. However, they did not much mind, as they had plenty of food in camp.

A day or so later, however, when Jack and Sam were out together, Jack got the very chance he wanted. They were walking along a rocky ridge, and, coming to the edge of a deep ravine, were debating whether to cross it or travel back, as they had seen no signs of game, and it looked as if a storm was brewing.

“I guess we’ll go back,” Sam remarked. “There doesn’t seem to be any——”

He looked around to see what Jack was doing, and beheld his chum down on one knee, aiming at something on a distant rock. Sam looked and saw, outlined in the clear light, a big ram. He did not speak, fearing to disconcert Jack’s aim, and the next instant the rifle of his chum cracked.

The ram gave a convulsive leap into the air, turned partly around, and then plunged over the rock, and went rolling down the steep side of the mountain.

“You got him, Jack! You got him!” cried Sam.

“It looks so,” admitted Jack with a smile of triumph.

“And he’s a beaut!” went on Sam. “But how will we get him?”

“Oh, he’s just where we want him,” said Jack. “Come on down.”

It was no easy task scrambling down the slope, at the bottom of which they had left their horses, but they managed it, and then rode to the spot where the ram had fallen. They found the body in the bushes, and Sam saw that he had not misstated it when he called it a “beaut.” The ram’s head was graced with a fine pair of horns, which Jack at once announced he would take back East as a trophy.

“Put ’em in your room at Washington Hall,” suggested Sam.

“Sure,” replied his chum.

It was difficult to get the ram back to camp, but they managed it by constructing a sort of litter from saplings, and having the horses pull it with ropes, dragging it along behind them. They found on their arrival that the others had not yet

reached camp, and sat down to wait for them.

Presently Long Gun, Nat and Bony came in.

“Where’s Budge?” asked Jack.

“Why, he went off shooting jack-rabbits,” explained Nat. “He said he’d be over near the river, down by the tall pine. He seems to like to pop over those rabbits better than going after big game.”

“I’ll take a walk down there and tell him to come in to supper,” said Jack. “Come on, Nat. I guess we had all the luck to-day, Sam.”

This was true, for Long Gun and the others had not been able to shoot anything.

As Jack and Nat advanced toward the river, which was about half a mile from camp, Nat suddenly called out:

“What’s that smell?”

“Whew! It isn’t very nice,” declared Jack as he took a long sniff. “No wonder they used to call this place Stinking Water before they named it the Shoshone.”

“What makes it smell so?” asked Nat.

“Well, I understand there are springs around here, the water of which is impregnated with sulphureted hydrogen.”

“That’s it. Sulphureted hydrogen! Humpty-doodle’s hydrangeas! I thought it smelled like the chemical laboratory at Washington Hall. Is it the river?”

“No, only some small springs, and some of them give off gases that kill animals. But there’s the tree where Budge ought to be. I s’pose he’s asleep.”

As they approached nearer the unpleasant odor became more pronounced. Then, as they topped a little mound, they looked down and saw their friend reclining on the ground near a dead cottonwood tree.

“Sure enough, he’s asleep,” remarked Jack. “Come on, we’ll wake him up. Get close, and then we’ll yell like wild Indians and scare him.”

They crept softly closer to the outstretched Budge. He did not stir. Then they

united their voices in a terrorizing yell.

But instead of Budge sitting up suddenly he remained in the same position, his gun by his side, and a couple of dead rabbits at his feet.

“That’s queer,” remarked Jack. “He’s certainly sleeping sound.”

He tiptoed up to his chum, and bending over looked closely at him. He was struck by the paleness of his face and the fact that Budge did not seem to breathe.

“Nat!” called Jack quickly, “he’s dead! He’s fallen asleep and been killed by those poisonous gases!”

Nat ran up. It did seem as if Budge was dead.

“We must carry him away from here,” said Jack sadly.

“I—I begin to feel rather faint myself,” said Nat as he sat down on the ground.

CHAPTER XXII

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

Jack glanced at Nat. The lad was pale, and Jack himself began to feel the effect of the poisonous gas. But he made up his mind he would not give in.

“Brace up, Nat!” he cried. “We must get Budge out of here. Maybe he’s only fainted. Brace up! It will only take us a minute, and then we’ll get where there is better air.”

“I will,” said Nat faintly.

He stood up, and by a strong effort fought off the feeling of faintness. Then he and Jack reached down and took hold of Budge, lifting him by his head and feet. His gun was strapped over his shoulder.

“There’s what did the mischief,” said Jack, and he nodded toward a spring, about five feet in diameter, near which Budge had been sitting when he had been overcome.

The poor lad’s body was limp, and it was hard to carry him, but Nat and Jack strained and staggered along. As they went on, the effect of the deadly gas became less, and soon they could breathe better.

“Do you—do you think he’s dead?” faltered Nat.

“I hope not,” answered Jack, but his voice was serious. “It depends on how long he has breathed that gas. I heard Tanker Ike say he once saw a grizzly bear killed by it, so it must be pretty powerful.”

“Have we got to carry him back to camp?”

“No, we’ll take him out of the reach of the vapor, and then one of us can run back and get the medicine chest. I’ll try some strong ammonia on him. That may revive him—if he isn’t dead.”

A little later they staggered with the limp body of Budge out on a clear place,

where the fumes of the gas could not be noticed.

“I’ll wait here with him until you run to camp,” said Jack, and when Nat, who had recovered from his faintness, had started off, Jack chafed Budge’s hands, and running to the river filled his cap with cold water, which he dashed into the face of the unconscious lad.

This treatment was effective in a measure, for Budge opened his eyes. Then he exclaimed:

“Don’t—don’t drown me!”

“Budge! Budge!” cried Jack. “Do you feel better?”

But the lad’s eyes closed again, and Jack feared that it was but a momentary reviving. He chafed the lad’s hands again, and tried to force some cold water from the river between his set teeth.

Then Nat came running back, bearing a medicine box, which Mr. Ranger had insisted that Jack take with him. Long Gun, Sam and Bony followed.

Jack took out a bottle of ammonia, and held it beneath the nose of Budge. The powerful liquid fumes made Budge gasp, and he struggled to sit up.

“Hi! quit!” he called. “Don’t burn me!” For the ammonia stung him.

“Oh, he isn’t dead!” cried Nat, much relieved.

“Pretty soon be all right,” said Long Gun, who had been told what had happened. “Plenty much fresh air make um well.”

And he seemed to be right, for presently Budge sat up, opened his eyes, and began feeling in his pockets.

“What do you want?” asked Jack.

“Where’smygum?” was what Budge wanted to know, and his companions laughed.

“I guess you’re all right when you can chew gum,” spoke Jack. “But what made you go over by that sulphur spring?”

“I was shooting jack-rabbits,” explained Budge, “and I thought that would be a good place. I didn’t like the smell, but pretty soon I fell asleep, and then——”

“Yes, and then if Jack and Nat hadn’t come along you’d be sleeping yet,” added Sam.

“’Sright,” admitted Budge.

They helped him back to camp, and he was soon feeling better, but he registered a firm resolve not to go too near the deadly gas spring again. Hunting was over for the day, and they were all soon gathered about the camp fire, telling their various experiences.

It was the middle of the night when Jack, who was rather restless, was awakened suddenly. At first he thought some one had called him, but as he raised up and looked over at his sleeping companions he realized that none of them were awake.

“I wonder what that noise was?” he asked himself.

Just then he heard, in the air above the tent, that same sighing, throbbing sound that had so startled them on a previous occasion. It was like the passage of some immense body through the air.

Jack, who was partly dressed, hurried to the flap of the tent. He peered upward into the blackness of the night.

Was it fancy, or did he see some great, mysterious shape moving over the camp? He could not tell, but the throbbing, swishing noise became fainter.

“I wonder what that is?” thought Jack as he went back to bed. In the morning he did not tell his chums nor Long Gun of the affair, fearing to frighten them.

They prepared for a big hunt the next day. There was a light fall of snow, which the Indian guide said would serve to enable them to track the game. They were out early in the morning on their horses, and were gone all day, keeping together. Jack shot a big buck, and Bony, to his great delight, brought down a fine mountain sheep, while the others had to be content with jack-rabbits.

Budge had entirely recovered from the effects of the deadly gas, but he said he felt too nervous to do any shooting, so he and Long Gun, who, despite his name,

was a poor shot, simply trailed along in the rear.

“I’d like to get another pair of big horns for my room,” said Jack toward the close of the day. “What do you think, Long Gun, have we time to go a little farther and try for a big ram?”

“Hu! Mebby,” answered the Indian. “Plenty sheep been here,” and he pointed to where the animals had scraped away the snow to get at the grass and shrubs beneath.

Jack and Nat started off, while the others made a temporary camp and warmed some tea. They were to stay there until Jack and Nat returned, which the lads promised to do within an hour if they saw no signs of sheep.

They tramped on, having left their horses in the temporary camp, Jack eagerly watching for a sign of a big pair of horns.

“I guess I’m not going to find them this time,” he said as he mounted a pinnacle of rock and looked about him. “It looks like a good place, too,” he added.

“Hark, something’s coming,” said Nat in a whisper.

There was a crackling in the bushes to Jack’s right. He turned in that direction, his rifle in readiness. Something was moving there. Was it a mountain sheep?

He raised his gun. A dark object could be seen to be moving behind the screen of bushes, and the snow on them was shaken off.

Suddenly there stepped into view, not a mountain sheep, but the figure of a lad, all in tatters.

For an instant Jack and Nat stared at the youth. He had appeared so unexpectedly that they did not know what to say. On his part, the lad stood there silent, as if he did not know what to do.

Then Jack threw down his rifle and sprang forward, at the same time crying out:

“Bill! It’s Bill Williams! Well, how in the world did you ever get here?”

CHAPTER XXIII

ANOTHER NIGHT SCARE

Will Williams, the strange, new boy, whom Jack had last seen at Washington Hall, now so far away, rushed forward.

“Jack Ranger!” he gasped, as if he could not believe it.

“That’s who I am,” responded our hero. “But, Bill, what has happened? You look as if you were suffering.”

“I am suffering,” was the answer. “I’m almost starved!”

“Starved!” exclaimed Nat. “Wobble-sided watermelons! And our camp just filled with good things! Come on, Bill. We’ll feed you up.”

The two chums clasped Will successively by the hand. Then Jack asked:

“How did you get away out here? The last I heard of you was when I received a letter and a telegram from your guardian, asking me to send you home if I saw you.”

“You—you’re not going to—are you?” faltered Will.

“Am I?” Jack clasped his arm about the shrinking form of the unfortunate lad. “Well, I guess not! I’d like to have that guardian of yours here, for about five minutes!”

“Petrified pancakes! So would I!” exclaimed Nat. “I’d send him over where that bad-smelling spring is to spend the night. But, Bill, you haven’t told us how you got here.”

“I hardly know myself,” was the answer. “I did run away, just as Mr. Gabel told you, Jack. I couldn’t stand his mean ways any longer. He refused to let me go camping with you, and said I would have to go to work, while school was closed for repairs, to make up the money he said I stole. I decided I would come out West and try to find my uncle. He’s out here somewhere, but where I haven’t

been able to learn. I had a few dollars saved up, that I had earned, and I came as far as they would bring me. Then I worked my way on from Chicago by jumping freights and by doing odd jobs whenever I got the chance. I heard, in a roundabout way, that my uncle was either in the southern part of Montana, or the northern part of Wyoming, and so I came on. I've been traveling around now for two weeks, trying to find him, and I've been living like a tramp, but I can't seem to locate him. I met some men who said they knew him, but they acted so mysterious that I could get no information from them. They didn't seem to want to tell me where he was. So I decided to keep on until I found him. I've been tramping all day, and when I heard you talking I thought maybe you were a party of hunters who would help me."

"And so we will," burst out Jack. "Come along to camp with us, Bill, and we'll fix you up. It's a shame, the way your guardian treats you. And your uncle can't be much better."

"Oh, he used to be kind to me," said the unfortunate lad, "but I don't believe he knows how things have gone with me. If I could find him I think he would take care of me."

"Well, maybe we can help find him for you," said Nat.

Little time was lost in getting back to the temporary camp, and there Will, who was weak and faint from hunger, was given a light meal. Then the whole party went on to the main camp, Will riding behind Jack, for the latter's horse would carry double.

"My, but you certainly are doing this up in style," remarked the ragged lad as he saw the fine tents and noted how comfortably Jack and his chums lived, in spite of the fact that they were far from civilization. His arrival created quite a sensation.

"Oh, when Jack Ranger does a thing, it's done good and proper," said Bony. "It's the first outing out of the gun club, and he wants to make a record, I guess."

"I want you all to have a good time, that's all I want," was Jack's reply.

Some better clothes were found for Will, and after a good meal some of the hopelessness faded from his face. He told of his wanderings in the mountains, and how he had worked his way from camp to camp, and from stage station to

stage station.

“But you’re done tramping around now,” said Jack.

“Have you—have you got room for me here?” faltered Will.

“Have we? Well, I guess!” was Jack’s hearty answer. “You can stay here as long as you like, or until you find your uncle. You’ve accepted my invitation to come camping, after all, and I guess your guardian would be surprised if he could see you now.”

“I guess he would,” remarked Will with a smile.

There was plenty of room in the big sleeping tent, and a bed was made up for the wanderer. It was the first good night’s rest he had had in nearly a week, he said.

As they had plenty of fresh meat in camp they did not go hunting for several days, but Jack and his chums could not remain inactive, so they all, including Will, went on short jaunts about the camp. A gun was provided for the newcomer, and he proved that he was a good shot, at least on jack-rabbits, which abounded in that region.

About a week after Will had joined his former chums they went on an all-day hunt. The luck fell to Bony and Sam this trip, for each of them killed a fine mountain ram, the horns of which were equal in size to the one slain by Jack.

Nat killed a small deer, and Will was delighted when he also brought one down.

“Plenty much game,” observed Long Gun. “No need hunt right ’way ’gin.”

“I guess Long Gun is getting tired,” observed Jack. “Well, of course we don’t want to kill just for the sake of killing, so I think we will take a few days off.”

The weather continued fine, being clear, and not too cold, while there was no deep snow to hamper the movements of the members of the gun club, though there were several light flurries. The lads went out on short trips, Will riding the horse assigned to Budge, for the latter was not a very enthusiastic sportsman, and would rather remain in camp, stretched on his back, chewing gum, than go after deer or mountain sheep.

“Well,” remarked Jack one night, about a week after the last hunt, “I think we’ll

go out again to-morrow and try to fill up the cupboard again. Supplies of fresh meat are running low.”

“Good idea,” commented Nat. “Maybe you can get another ram with horns to match your first pair.”

Jack was successful in this venture, for after a long day’s jaunt he got a fine shot, just at sunset, bowling over a large ram. They took the head and horns back to camp, leaving the carcass to be brought in the next morning, having first taken the precaution, however, of tying the choicest portions high in a tree, out of the reach of marauding animals.

As they were all gathered about the camp fire that night, discussing the events of the day, Jack suddenly held up his hand to insure silence.

“Hark!” he exclaimed. “There’s that queer sound again.”

In the air over their heads was the rushing of great wings, while there was a throbbing as if some mighty beast was passing over the camp.

“Wow!” cried Long Gun, and he made a dive for the tent.

“That’s it!” said Nat softly. “I wonder if we shall ever solve the mystery?”

The boys looked at each other in alarm. Will sprang to his feet.

“That sound!” he cried. “I heard it one night when I was camping in the woods.”

“Where?” asked Jack.

“About ten miles from here. It’s the same noise.”

“We must solve this mystery!” exclaimed Jack. “I believe it must be——”

But he did not finish the sentence, for from the air above them sounded the call of a voice:

“To the left! To the left!” was the cry. “There’s the camp fire we saw before.”

They all sprang to their feet and looked up into the dark sky. Surely that was some vast shape hovering over them! And then the throbbing and the rush of wings died away.

CHAPTER XXIV

JACK GETS A BEAR

“Fellows,” spoke Jack, and his voice trembled in spite of his efforts to render it steady, “we’ve got to get at the bottom of this.”

“That’s right,” agreed Bony.

“Maybe Bill can tell us something,” suggested Sam.

“Long Gun ought to know something about it. He’s lived around here all his life,” said Budge, speaking plainly this time.

“Long Gun thinks it’s spirits or something like that,” remarked Jack. “He’s so scared he can’t speak. But what about you, Bill? Are you sure you heard it before?”

“Yes,” replied the newcomer. “I heard that same noise about a week ago. I was in a lumber camp, to which I had worked my way, and one night, just about this time, we all heard that rushing sound in the air. Some of the men were frightened, but others said it was a flight of eagles or other big birds.”

“That’s what we thought it was, first,” came from Nat. “But I don’t believe it now.”

“Why not?” asked Bony. “It’s the same sound.”

“But did you hear some men speaking?” demanded Nat. “We didn’t hear that before.”

“No, that’s right,” agreed Jack. “And the voices were quite plain, as if they were close at hand.”

“Maybe they were chasing the peculiar creature, whatever it was,” suggested Sam.

“That might be it,” Jack said.

“Let’s give ’em a hail,” put in Bony.

The boys thought this a good idea, and united their voices in a loud shout. After that they fired their rifles in a volley, but no answer came back.

“Either they don’t hear us, or they don’t want to answer us,” commented Jack.

“Or else that big bird or beast, whatever it was they were chasing, has eaten them up,” suggested Budge, preparing to stow away a fresh wad of gum.

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Nat. “I don’t believe it was a big bird.”

“Waitansee,” was all Budge said.

Though the boys discussed the matter for some time longer, they could arrive at no satisfactory explanation. As for Long Gun, it was useless to ask him his opinion of the mysterious noise. He cowered under his blankets, murmured something about “bad spirits,” and predicted that evil would befall any one who sought to solve the secret.

The night was not disturbed by any further alarms, and they were all up bright and early the next morning, with fine appetites.

“The big bird, or whatever it was, didn’t steal any of us,” remarked Jack as he was washing for breakfast. “I hope it didn’t steal the ram I shot yesterday. We must go after that meat as soon as we have breakfast.”

Leaving Budge and Long Gun in camp, the others went to where Jack and Nat had slain the ram. It was quite a long ride, and they took their time.

“Look here, Jack,” called Nat, as, riding slightly in advance, he was first to arrive at where the carcass had been tied in a tree. “Something’s been here at it. There’s none of it left.”

“Do you mean that?” cried Jack, riding up.

“Sure. You can see it’s gone.”

The boys dismounted and went closer to the tree. There was no doubt but that the choice portions of the ram were gone. And at the foot of the tree the dirt was trampled down as if whatever it was that had stolen the meat had been put to

considerable trouble to get it.

“It was a bear that took it!” cried Sam.

“How do you know?” asked Jack.

“Look where he climbed the tree. The bark’s torn off with his claws, and you can see the marks of his paws in the soft dirt.”

“That’s right,” agreed Nat. “Lopsided lollypops! but it must have been a big one, too! Look where the first marks of his claws begin,” and he pointed to abrasions in the bark a good distance above the ground.

“Do bears eat meat?” asked Bony, cracking all his finger knuckles excitedly.

“Sometimes, I believe,” answered Jack. “Anyway, if the bear that stole my ram didn’t get it for himself he must have pulled it down for some friends of his.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nat.

“Here are the marks of footsteps,” went on Jack, “and they aren’t ours, either. Look, whoever made these had heavy boots with hobnails in them, made in the shape of an arrow.”

He pointed to the ground. There, in addition to the paw-marks left by the bear, were footprints, clearly to be seen, and it needed but a glance to show that they had not been made by any of the boys or Long Gun.

“Some one—some men, that is—have been here since Nat and I were here yesterday,” went on Jack. “Either they or the bear took the ram.”

“Maybe they were the men we heard yelling last night,” suggested Nat.

“Yes, and maybe they have a trained bear, that goes around stealing meat for them,” added Sam with a laugh.

“Don’t get such crazy ideas,” objected Nat.

“Well, that might happen,” went on Sam. “Almost anything is likely to happen in this queer country. I wonder what we’d better do about it?”

“I know what I’m going to do,” said Jack.

“What?”

“I’m going to trail that bear. He’s left plenty of marks, and maybe I can get a shot at him. I owe him something for taking my meat, and he’ll make a good substitute.”

“That’s the way to talk,” cried Bony. “I’m with you, Jack.”

The marks of the bear’s paws were plainly visible for some distance, leading off to the right, and up the sloping side of a mountain. As for the footprints of the man or men, they were soon lost to sight. But the boys decided to trail the bear. They lost the marks after about a mile, but arguing that the beast would make nearly a straight line for his den, after he had the meat, the young hunters laid their course as well as they could by compass and kept on.

They had to travel slowly, because the road was not very good for the horses, and at noon they had not come up to bruin. Eating a light lunch, they kept on, and it was mid-afternoon when Jack, who was ahead, noticed that his horse suddenly stopped and began to shiver.

“Fellows,” he cried, “we’re near the bear. That’s what ails the horse.”

The other steeds began to exhibit signs of terror, so it was decided to dismount and lead them back a short distance.

“I’ll stay with the horses,” volunteered Bony. “I—er—I don’t exactly feel up to hunting bears to-day.”

“You’re not afraid, are you?” asked Sam.

“No, not exactly. You might call it—out of practice,” and Bony began cracking his knuckles.

They tried to persuade him to go with them, but he would not, so Jack, Will, Nat and Sam went on. It did not take much searching to discover a trail leading farther up the side of the mountain, and following this a little way they smelled the unmistakable odor of wild animals.

“His cave’s near here,” whispered Jack.

They came in sight of it a moment later, and then there was no doubt as to who

had stolen part of the ram. For in front of a black opening in the side of the big hill was a portion of the carcass.

“I wonder if he’s in there?” said Jack.

“Maybe you’ll wish he wasn’t,” commented Sam.

“I will not,” was Jack’s bold reply. “I’m going to get a shot at him now.”

“How are you going to get him out?”

“I’ll show you.”

Jack quickly made a torch of some dry bark, and lighting it, tossed it into the mouth of the cave. Then he ran quickly back, and with his chums stood waiting with ready rifle.

“We’d better separate a bit,” said Nat. “If he comes out with a rush, and you miss him, Jack, we can take a crack at him.”

This was voted good advice, and Sam, Will and Nat moved down the slope a short distance, leaving Jack nearer the cave.

“I guess he isn’t going to come out,” called Jack to his chums. “He’s asleep, maybe. I’ll try to wake him up.”

He caught up a large stone, and tossed it into the cave. Hardly had he done so than there sounded a series of angry growls, and with a loud “woof!” bruin appeared at the mouth of the cavern, his little eyes glistening with wrath, and the fur on his back raised in a long ridge.

“Shoot him, Jack!” cried Nat.

But Jack did not need this advice. Dropping on one knee he took quick aim and pulled the trigger. At the sound of the shot bruin lurched forward, and without the loss of a second Jack pumped in another cartridge and let him have it right in the head.

Then the big, tawny brute, with a scream, launched himself forward, and doubling up into a ball, began to roll down the mountain-side, straight toward where Sam and Nat stood.

“Look out!” cried Jack, for he saw that the bear was in his death struggle, and might attack his chums.

Sam and Nat needed no warning, but as they turned to get out of the way of the infuriated creature, Nat’s foot slipped. He fell, and, to save himself, he clutched at Sam. They both went down in a heap, rolling over and over, but a few feet in front of the bear, that came bounding after them, clawing up dirt, stones and little shrubs as it tried to stay its progress.

CHAPTER XXV

SOME PECULIAR MARKS

“Shoot! Shoot!” cried Will Williams, who had remained to one side. “Shoot him again, Jack!”

“I can’t! I may hit Sam or Nat!”

Jack did not know what to do. He and Will had to stand there and watch their chums rolling and slipping down the mountain-side, with the bear, in its death struggle, slowly gaining on them.

Suddenly the beast struck a large boulder, bounded up into the air, and came down nearly on top of the two lads. Jack’s heart almost stopped beating, and Will turned his head aside. Bear and boys seemed to be in one indistinguishable heap.

“They’ll be killed!” cried Will.

Jack started down the hill on the run. He had not taken a dozen steps, his gaze all the while fixed on that heap, which had now reached a little ledge, where it came to a stop, when he saw Sam and Nat slowly extricate themselves.

“They’re alive, anyway,” he murmured.

He heard Will following after him, but did not look back. He wanted to see what the bear would do. Sam and Nat appeared bewildered, but Jack noticed that they moved away from bruin. The brute was quiet.

“I wonder if I killed him?” thought Jack. Then he called out: “Is he dead?”

“As a door-nail,” replied Sam.

“Are you hurt?” sung out Will.

“Only bruised some,” answered Sam, rubbing several places on his body.

By this time Jack had reached his chums. Their clothing was disheveled, and their hands and faces were covered with dirt, but the bear had not harmed them.

“I thought it was all up with you,” said Jack with relief in his voice.

“So did I,” admitted Nat. “But I guess that bear was dead when he started to roll. It was when it hit us, anyway, for it never made a move. It rolled right on top of us, and Sam yelled——”

“So did you,” spoke Sam quickly. “You were just as frightened as I was.”

“I guess that’s right,” admitted Nat. “But you got your bear, all right, Jack.”

They looked at the dead animal. It was a large grizzly.

“Another trophy for the gun club,” remarked Sam. “Say, we’re doing all right for amateurs. Jack’s new organization is a success.”

“It’s all to the bear steaks!” exclaimed Nat with a grin, as he gently caressed his elbow, where the skin was rubbed off.

“How are we going to get this back to camp?” asked Will.

“Oh, I guess we can pile it on the horses,” said Nat.

“Not until it’s cut up,” remarked Jack. “Did you ever try to lift a dead bear?”

None of them had, and when they tried to raise the lifeless bruin they found it beyond their strength. They had keen hunting knives with them, however, and soon had the bear skinned and the choicest portions cut off. Jack took the skin, intending to have a rug made of it. Then the horses were brought up, and the meat tied on the backs of the saddles. Satisfied with their day’s hunt thus far, the boys headed for camp, Will getting a shot at a fine ram on the way back, but missing it, much to his regret.

“Better luck next time,” consoled Jack.

Long Gun and Budge had a fine supper ready for the young hunters, and never was a meal better enjoyed. Then, as it grew dark, they all sat about the camp fire, listening to the story of killing the bear.

“Oh, this is the kind of life to lead,” said Nat with a sigh. “It’s simply perfect.”

“And to think that we’ll soon have to go back to Washington Hall,” put in Bony.

“I know where Jack would rather be than here,” said Sam with a grin barely visible in the flickering light of the camp fire.

“Where?” asked Nat.

“Over at Pryor’s Gap, where a certain girl with brown eyes——”

Plunk!

A wad of dried leaves took Sam squarely in the face.

“You dry up!” commanded Jack as he looked around for another missile.

“Oh, of course; but I thought you’d like to be reminded of her,” went on Sam.

“I guess he can think of her without you reminding him,” added Nat.

“I’m going to turn in,” announced Jack suddenly, and the laughs of his chums did not seem to disconcert him. They all retired a few minutes later and slept soundly.

“Well, what’s the program to-day?” asked Sam as they stepped from the tent the next morning into the cold, crisp air. “Hello,” he added, “it’s been snowing again.”

“Plenty good for track sheep,” announced Long Gun.

“Oh, we don’t need any fresh meat. What’s the use of going hunting again?” asked Jack.

“What will we do, then—go fishing?” demanded Nat.

“I have an idea that it would be fun to take a trip back over the mountain,” went on Jack. “We’ve never been in that direction.”

“It’s quite a climb,” said Bony as he looked up the immense hill, at the foot of which they were camped.

“I know it, but Long Gun says there’s a good trail, and we can go on our horses and take it easy. What do you say?”

“I say let’s go,” put in Will. “I heard there was some sort of a camp over there,

and maybe I could get a trace of my uncle.”

“Then we’ll go,” decided Jack. “What sort of a camp is it?”

“I don’t know exactly. I met a man during my wanderings who told me he had been delivering supplies at a camp over on the eastern slope of Rattlesnake Mountain. This is Rattlesnake Mountain, isn’t it?”

“That’s the name it goes by,” said Jack. “But what sort of supplies did he take?”

“That’s the queer part of it. He couldn’t tell. They were in boxes, and he was never allowed to go very close to the camp. He always had to halt quite a way off, leave his stuff and drive away.”

“That’s queer,” commented Jack. “I wonder if that can have anything to do with _____”

Then he stopped suddenly, without finishing his sentence.

“Well, with what?” asked Bony.

“Never mind,” replied Jack as he began oiling his gun. “Let’s get ready to go over the top of the mountain.”

They found it a hard climb, but they took it by degrees and did not hurry the horses, who were used to mountain trails. They reached the summit at noon, and after a rest and lunch, they started down the slope.

The newly-fallen snow made a white mantle over the earth, and it was undisturbed by any marks until they came along.

“No signs of game,” said Jack, “but I guess we don’t need any. Long Gun and Budge will be able to get up a good supper with what’s in camp,” for the Indian and the gum-chewing lad had remained behind.

They traveled on for a few miles farther, admiring the view of a much more wild and desolate country than was visible on the side of the mountain where they were staying.

“Well, I guess we’d better turn back,” called Sam as he noted that the sun was getting low in the sky.

“No; let’s ride down to that little level spot and look over,” proposed Jack. “Then we’ll come back.”

They were not long in reaching the place. Nat, who had urged his horse ahead, was the first to get to it. Suddenly he pulled his animal back and uttered a cry.

“What is it?” called Jack.

“Some peculiar tracks,” replied Nat. “Look here!”

They all rode up. There in the snow were many strange marks. The white crystals were scattered, and in some places the ground was swept bare. In other spots there were many footprints.

“See!” cried Jack. “The man with the arrow made in hobnails on the soles of his shoes has been here!”

He pointed to the impressions.

“Yes, and there’s been a fight or a struggle here,” added Sam. And, indeed, it did seem so, for in some places the ground was torn up, the dirt being scattered over the snow.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SPRING TRAP

For several moments the boys gazed in silence at the strange marks they had come across. Then Jack said:

“Well, fellows, we seem to be up against some more of that mystery.”

“Why?” asked Bony. “Do you think this has anything to do with the other?”

“I do.”

“You mean the strange sound we heard at night?” asked Will.

“That’s it,” went on Jack. “I think we are on the track of something queer.”

“And do you intend to look further?” was Nat’s query.

“Well, not to-day,” answered Jack. “But I will sooner or later. I believe something happened here which has to do with that queer disturbance we have heard several times. What it is I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”

“Say, I have an idea,” came from Bony.

“Don’t let it get away from you,” advised Nat.

“No, I’m serious,” went on the lanky youth. “I think these men have some strange beast or bird in captivity, and that it gets away from them at times. Maybe that’s what happened here, and they had to fight to capture it again.”

“That’s nonsense!” exclaimed Sam.

“Not so nonsensical, either,” Jack hastened to say. “If it was an immense bird, like a big eagle, it would account for the noises we heard—at least, some of them.”

“But there is no eagle large enough for men to ride on its back,” objected Nat.

“How do you know men were on its back?”

“Didn’t we hear them call and speak about our camp fire? How could they see it unless they were up high in the air, on the back of some big bird?”

“They might have been on some point of the mountain above us,” said Bony. “They could have the eagle, or whatever it was, tied by a cord.”

“Yes,” admitted Nat; “but I don’t believe it’s a bird.”

“Me either,” came from Sam. “But what is it?”

“Let’s look at the marks a little more carefully,” proposed Jack.

“Several men have been here, struggling with the—the—er—whatever it was,” spoke Will. “See the different footprints.”

That much was evident. In addition to the man with the mark on his shoes of the arrow in hobnails, there were tracks of several other individuals.

“And if this isn’t the mark of a big bird’s wing, I’ll eat a pair of snowshoes!” exclaimed Nat suddenly. “Look here, fellows!”

They hurried to where he was. There in the snow was the unmistakable print of what seemed to be a wing of a great creature of the air.

“And here’s another wing,” added Sam a little later as he walked slowly over the level place. “But they’re some distance apart.”

“I should say so,” agreed Jack. “Sixty feet, if they’re an inch.”

“But the marks are those of two wings, and they were made at the same time,” went on Sam. “Look, you can see where the body comes between the wings. The bird was over on its back. That happened when they tried to secure it.”

“But sixty feet,” objected Nat. “There’s no bird living with a spread of wings like that. It’s out of the question.”

“Here’s the evidence,” spoke Sam obstinately. “You can see for yourself.”

“Sixty feet spread,” murmured Jack. “It doesn’t seem possible.”

But there was no doubt but that the marks in the snow were those of wings, and, as Jack paced the distance from tip to tip, they proved to be over sixty feet apart.

“Maybe the men have discovered some prehistoric monster,” suggested Will, “and are trying to subdue it so they can exhibit it. There used to be monsters as large as the marks left by this thing, whatever it is.”

“Yes,” admitted Jack; “but they disappeared from the earth ages ago. Only their fossil remains are to be found now.”

“But might one not be alive, by chance, in some big mountain cave?” asked Nat.

“I don’t know,” spoke Jack with a worried look. “It has me puzzled, fellows. I don’t know what to think.”

“Let’s go back to camp, tell Long Gun about it, and bring him here to-morrow to see it,” suggested Sam.

“Long Gun would never come,” said Jack. “He’s too much afraid of bad spirits. No, boys, we’ll have to solve this ourselves, if it’s to be solved at all.”

The boys walked around the little level place, whereon there was the mute evidence of some terrific struggle.

“The queer part of it is,” said Sam, “that the footsteps of the men don’t seem to go anywhere, nor come from anywhere. Look, they begin here, and they end over there, as if they had dropped down from the clouds and had gone up again on the back of the big bird.”

Jack looked more thoughtful. As Sam had said, there were no marks of the men coming or going, and they could not have reached the level place, nor departed from it, without leaving some marks in the tell-tale snow.

“I give it up!” exclaimed Jack. “Let’s get back to camp. It’s getting late.”

They started, talking of nothing on the way but the mystery, and becoming more and more tangled the more they discussed it.

It was getting dusk when they came in sight of the camp fire, and they saw Budge and the Indian busy at something to one side of the blaze.

“I wonder what they’re up to now?” said Jack.

“Oh, probably Budge is teaching Long Gun how to chew gum,” was Nat’s

opinion.

A moment later something happened. Budge seemed to shoot through the air, as if blown up in an explosion. He shot over the top of a small tree, and coming down on the other side, hung suspended by one foot.

“Help me down! Help me down!” he cried.

“What’s the matter?” called Jack, spurring his horse forward.

“I’m caught!” answered Budge.

“It certainly does look so,” spoke Nat, and he could not refrain from laughing at the odd spectacle Budge presented as he hung by one leg in a rope that was fast to the top of a tree, which bent like a bow with his weight.

“Take me down!” wailed the unfortunate one.

“How did it happen?” asked Sam.

“Long Gun made a spring trap,” gasped Budge, “and—and——”

“And you wanted to try it,” finished Jack, as he went to his chum’s aid.

CHAPTER XXVII

ORDERED BACK

“Hurry up and get me down!” pleaded Budge, as he tried to grasp the sapling with his hands, to ease the strain on his foot.

“I’m coming,” replied Jack, who was laughing heartily. “Guess I’ll have to cut the tree down, though.”

“No; I have a better plan than that,” spoke Will. “I’ll show you.”

In another moment he was climbing up the thin trunk of the hickory that served to hold Budge Rankin suspended. Then Will’s plan was apparent. As he climbed up farther, his weight, added to that of Budge, caused the sapling to sway toward the ground.

“Grab me and cut the rope!” cried Budge.

“All right,” replied Jack, and when his queer chum was near enough to him, Jack seized him around the waist. Nat, with his hunting knife, severed the thongs of deer sinew from which Long Gun had made the loop. Then Budge was released, and he assumed an upright position on the ground, while Will dropped from the bending tree, which straightway sprang back to its place.

“Hu!” grunted Long Gun, with just the suspicion of a smile on his copper-colored face. “Boy go up heap fast.”

“’Sright,” admitted Budge, while he began hunting through his pockets for a piece of gum.

“What in the world did you ever put your foot in that trap for?” asked Jack, when it was ascertained that Budge had not been injured.

“Well,” he said, “I’ll tell you. You see, I asked Long Gun to show me how to make a spring trap. I thought it might come in handy when I got back home. He showed me, and made one. But it didn’t look to me as if it would work. So I just touched the trigger with my foot, and—and——”

“We saw the rest,” finished Bony. “Cracky! But I thought at first you were giving us an exhibition of a human skyrocket.”

“Or trying to imitate the gigantic bird that left the marks in the snow,” added Sam. “Let’s tell Budge about it.”

Which they did; and as his chum was usually pretty sharp in his conclusions, Jack asked him what he thought it was that had made the mysterious prints in the snow.

“It must have been a roc, one of those birds you read about in the ‘Arabian Nights,’” declared Budge.

“There never were such birds,” objected Jack.

“Sure there were,” declared Budge. “It says so in the book.”

“No one ever saw one,” objected Sam.

“No, and you never saw George Washington,” spoke Budge quickly. “But you’re sure he was here once, ain’t you?”

“This is different,” remarked Bony.

“Sallright. You’ll find that’s a big bird, like a roc,” declared Budge, while he began to help the Indian get supper.

They discussed, until quite late that night, the cause of the mysterious noises they had heard, and also what peculiar bird or beast had had the struggle with the men. Then Jack finally declared:

“Oh, what’s the use of wasting our breath over it? We can’t decide what it was. There’s only one thing to do.”

“What’s that?” asked Sam.

“Try and find out what it was.”

“How can we?”

“Well, I’ve got two plans. One is to make another trip on the other side of the mountain, and go farther next time. We can search for some sort of a camp.”

“And the other plan?” asked Will.

“Is to keep watch, and see if we hear that thing passing over our camp again. If we do, we’ll throw a lot of light wood on the fire, and when it blazes up we may catch sight of it.”

“That’s a good idea,” declared Nat. “We’ll take turns keeping watch at night, and we’ll begin right away.”

They agreed that this was a good plan, and the night was divided into six watches, one for each of the lads, as Long Gun positively refused to have anything to do with seeking a solution of the mystery. Some light wood was collected and piled near the camp fire, in readiness to throw on, so as to produce a bright blaze the moment the queer noise was heard in the air overhead.

But that night passed without incident, and so did the three following. During the day the boys went hunting in the forest, or fishing in the Shoshone River, having fairly good luck both on land and in the water.

It was about a week after Jack’s plan of keeping night watches had been in effect, that something happened. He had about given up hearing the noise again, and was about ready to propose that the next day they should go on a trip over the mountain.

It was Jack’s watch, and he was sitting by the camp fire, thinking of his father, his aunts and matters at home, and, it must be confessed, of a certain brown-eyed girl.

“I must take a trip over to Pryor’s Gap and see her,” he said softly to himself.

The fire was burning low, and Jack arose to put on some more wood. As he did so he heard a vibration in the air, not far above the camp. Then came what seemed to be a whirr of wings and a throbbing noise.

“The mystery! The mystery!” cried Jack, tossing an armful of light wood on the embers.

The fire blazed up at once, and Jack looked upward. He saw a great shape hovering over the camp, a shape that was fully sixty feet wide, and he knew he could not be mistaken, for there were the gigantic wings flapping. The object

was flying right across the valley.

Will, Sam and Nat rushed from the tent. They had heard Jack's cry.

"Do you see it?" the watcher demanded. "Right up there!"

The fire blazed up more brightly, and in the glare of it could be dimly seen something like a great bird.

"That's it!" cried Nat. "Gasolened grasshoppers! but what is it?"

No one answered. The throbbing and whirring grew fainter, and the shape passed out of sight. From the tent could be heard the howling of Long Gun, as he prayed in his own tongue.

"Quit that!" yelled Bony from the canvas shelter. "Do you want to frighten us all to death?"

Then Long Gun's cries were muffled, and it was evident that he had hidden his head under his blankets.

"This settles it!" declared Jack positively. "We'll make another trip over the mountain to-morrow and see if we can't solve this."

"That's what we will!" added Nat. "First thing you know we'll wake up some night and find ourselves gone."

They made preparations to be away all night if necessary, taking plenty of blankets and food. Budge and Long Gun decided to remain in camp to look after things.

"S'posin' you don't come back?" asked Budge, all in one word.

"Oh, we'll come back," replied Jack confidently. "If we don't, you and Long Gun will have to come after us."

"Where'll you be?"

"You'll have to hunt," was Jack's answer as he flicked his horse with the quirt.

They had decided to do some hunting as they proceeded, and were on the lookout for game. The weather continued fine, and the snow had disappeared,

though they might expect heavy storms almost any day, Long Gun said.

They crossed the mountain ridge, and started down the other side, without having had a chance to shoot anything. They reached the place where they had seen the mysterious marks in the snow, and made a careful examination, but could discover nothing new.

“Well, Jack, which way now?” asked Sam as they stood looking about them.

“Down the mountain,” decided Jack. “I think we may get a shot at some deer, if we don’t find anything else in the valley. Long Gun said it was a good hunting ground.”

They rode on, Jack and Nat in advance. Whether their horses were better than the steeds of their companions, or whether Jack and Nat unconsciously urged them to greater speed, was not apparent, but the fact was that in about an hour the two found themselves alone, having distanced their companions.

“Let’s wait for them,” suggested Nat.

“No, let’s keep on. It’s a good trail, and they can’t miss it. They’ll catch up to us soon. Maybe we can see something to shoot if we go on a little way, or maybe _____”

“Maybe we’ll see that mysterious bird,” finished Nat. “I believe you’d rather find that than kill a big buck.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Jack slowly. “I’d like to get a nice buck, but I’d also like to solve that mystery.”

“Speaking of bucks,” whispered Nat quickly, “look there! Two of ’em!”

He pointed to a little glade, into which they were turning, and Jack saw two large mule deer feeding on the grass.

“A buck and a doe,” he said as he raised his rifle. “I think we are close enough to risk a shot. You take the buck, Nat. You haven’t had a good pair of horns yet, and that fellow has some beauts. We’ll both fire together.”

Nat nodded to show that he understood. The deer had not scented the young hunters, but were still quietly feeding. Slowly Jack and Nat raised their rifles,

having dismounted from their horses.

Just as they were about to pull the triggers a curious thing happened. The deer suddenly raised their heads, and gazed at a spot to the left of them. Then they bounded away, so swiftly that it was difficult for the eye to follow them.

“Well, did you see that?” asked Nat. “Something scared them.”

“Yes, and it wasn’t us,” said Jack. “We’re out of sight, and the wind’s blowing from them to us. I’m going to see what it was that sent them off.”

He mounted his horse again, an example that Nat followed, and they rode down the glade to where the deer had been feeding.

“I wonder if it could have been a bear?” asked Jack of his chum. “If it was——”

He did not get a chance to finish the sentence, for even as he spoke the bushes just in front of the two lads were parted, and three men stepped into view.

“What are you lads doing here?” asked one of the strangers sternly.

“We—we were hunting,” replied Jack. “We saw two deer, but they ran before we could get a shot.”

“Well, you’d better make back tracks to where you came from,” said another man gruffly. “Vamoose, you!”

“Are these private grounds?” asked Jack. “We didn’t know. We’re camped on the other side of the mountain, and we understood we could hunt here.”

“Well, you can’t,” said the third man. “These aren’t private grounds, but we don’t want you around here, so you’d better skedaddle. Move on, now, or it won’t be healthy for you.”

As he spoke he advanced his rifle in a threatening manner.

“Oh, we don’t want to trespass,” spoke Nat. “We’ll go.”

“You’d better,” was the grim response of the man who had first spoken. “Clear out, and don’t come here again. We don’t want any spies around.”

“We’re not spies,” said Jack, wondering that the man should use such a term.

“Well, we don’t care what you are. Clear out! That’s all! Clear out!”

There was nothing to do but turn back. Slowly Jack and Nat wheeled their horses, meanwhile narrowly eyeing the men. The trio, though roughly dressed, did not appear like hard characters or desperadoes. They looked like miners.

“You’ll have to move faster than that,” said the man who had spoken first. “If you don’t we may have to make you.”

There was a movement in the bushes back of him, and Jack and Nat glanced in that direction to see who was coming. Another figure stepped into view, the figure of a lad well known to Jack and Nat, for it was none other than Jerry Chowden, the former bully of Washington Hall.

“Jerry Chowden!” gasped Jack.

“Jack—Jack Ranger!” exclaimed the bully, no less surprised than were the two lads on horses.

“Do you know him?” asked one of the men quickly of Jerry.

“Yes—er—that is——”

“Come on, you! Move away from here if you don’t want to get into trouble!” fairly shouted one of the men. He advanced toward Jack and Nat, who, deeming discretion the better part of valor, clapped spurs to their horses, and raced along the trail to rejoin their companions. As they galloped on Jack gave one glance over his shoulder. He saw Jerry Chowden in earnest conversation with the three men, and that our hero and Nat was the subject of the talk was evident from the manner in which the bully was pointing toward them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WILL SAVES JACK'S LIFE

“What do you think of that, Jack?” asked Nat. “Bullyragging bean-poles! but who would have expected to meet Jerry Chowden out here? What do you make of it?”

“I don’t know,” Jack replied. “I’m as much surprised as you are. Not only at seeing him, but at meeting those men, and at being ordered back.”

“Do you think Jerry had anything to do with them making us move away?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean do you think he told those men lies about us? Such as saying we were dangerous characters, and not safe to have around?”

“No, I hardly think that. I believe those men have something to conceal, and would order back any one who they thought would discover their secret. They ordered us back before Jerry appeared and recognized us.”

“That’s so. But how do you suppose he came to get in with them?”

“I don’t know. It’s all part of the same puzzle, I think—the mysterious sounds, the queer marks in the snow, and all that. Of course, Jerry may have met them by accident, and they might have hired him. We knew he came out West, you know, after the part he played in kidnapping us, and very likely he was willing to do any kind of rascally work these men wanted.”

“Yes, that’s probable. But what do you s’pose it is?”

“I give it up; that is, for the time being. But I’m going to solve this mystery, Nat, if it takes all winter. We’ve got something to do now besides hunt. We’ll see what these men are up to. Maybe it’s something criminal, such as Jonas Lavine and his gang were mixed up in.”

“I hardly think that.”

“What do you think, then?”

“I believe they have some rare kind of animal or bird, or, maybe, several of them, and they are going to place them on exhibition. For I’m sure the noise we heard, and the marks in the snow, were made by some gigantic bird.”

“Oh, you’re away off,” declared Jack. “It isn’t possible.”

“That’s all right. ’Most anything is possible nowadays,” answered Nat.

They soon rejoined their comrades, and told them what had happened. Sam was for going on, defying the men, and administering a sound drubbing to Jerry.

“Then we’ll find out what’s up,” he said, “and end all this suspense.”

“Yes, and maybe get into trouble,” objected Jack. “There must be several men in that camp, if it was a camp, and those we saw seemed ready to use their guns on us. No, I think we’ll have to prospect around a bit first, until we see how the land lays. I’m not going to run into danger. We made a mistake by moving too suddenly in the bogus stock certificate case, and only because of good luck were the rascals caught. I’m going a little slower this time.”

“Jerry Chowden is certainly going to the bad fast,” declared Bony.

“We don’t know that he is in anything bad this time,” said Jack. “It may be all right, and those men may be engaged in some regular business. But I admit it looks suspicious.”

A sharp snowstorm kept the boys in camp the next two days, but on the third, as fresh meat was getting low, they started off again after game, leaving Budge and Long Gun, as usual, in charge of the place.

“Boys, we’ve got to get something this time,” said Jack. “The place is like Mother Hubbard’s cupboard, almost bare, so don’t despise even jack-rabbits, though, of course, a nice deer or a sheep would go better.”

They had been directed by Long Gun to take a trail that led obliquely up the side of the mountain, as the Indian said it was a likely place for game, and at noon they camped in a little clearing for lunch, having had no sight of anything bigger than squirrels, which they would not shoot.

“I tell you what it is,” said Jack, after thinking the matter over, “I believe we’re too closely bunched. We ought to divide up, some go one way, and some the other. We’d be more likely to see something then. We can make a circle, and work our way around back to camp by nightfall.”

“All right,” agreed Sam. “Bony and I will take the trail to the left, and you can go to the right with Nat and Will. I’ll wager we beat you, too.”

“That’s a go,” agreed Jack. “Come on.”

A little later the two parties of young hunters separated, and were soon lost to sight of each other.

For an hour or more Jack, Nat and Will slowly urged their horses through the light snow. They kept a sharp lookout for signs of game, but were beginning to despair of seeing any, when Jack uttered a cry.

“There’s been a deer along here,” he said. “And not long ago, either, if I’m any judge of the signs Long Gun taught us.”

“It does look so,” admitted Nat. “Easy, now, and maybe we can trail him.”

“We’d better leave our horses, though,” Jack went on. “It’s bad going, and they make quite a bit of noise.”

“I’ll stay with them,” volunteered Nat. “I’ve had my share of good shots lately. Let Will have a show. You and he go ahead, Jack.”

Jack did not want to leave Nat, but his chum insisted that some one had to stay with the animals, and he wanted to do it. So Will and Jack started off alone to trail the deer.

They went on about a mile, the trail becoming fresher at every step, until Will, who was close behind Jack, gently touched his companion on the arm and pointed to the left.

There, framed in a little opening of the trees, pawing the snow off the grass in a little glade, stood a noble buck mule deer, the largest Jack had ever seen. The animal had not heard nor scented them.

“Take the shot, Will,” urged Jack. “You may never get another like that.”

“No, I’d rather you would.”

“Nonsense. I’ve shot several of ’em. You take it.”

“I’d rather you would.”

“Go on,” urged Jack in a whisper. “Wait, though, we’ll move forward a bit, and you work off to the left. You’ll get a better shot then. The wind’s just right.”

They went forward a few feet cautiously, until they stood just on the edge of the clearing. Then Will, stepping a few paces to the left, raised his rifle. No sooner had he done so than, to his surprise and regret, his arms began to shake violently. He had a severe touch of “buck fever.”

“I—I can’t do it. I’m too nervous,” he said in a whisper to Jack.

“Nonsense. Wait a minute and aim again. You’ll be all right in a second. Take a long breath and count five.”

Will did as directed, but it was no use. The muzzle of his rifle wobbled more than ever when he tried to aim.

“I—I can’t,” he whispered again. “You shoot, Jack.”

Then, realizing that Will was too nervous to do it, and not wanting to see the buck escape, as they needed fresh meat in camp, Jack took aim and pulled the trigger.

At the instant the report rang out, the buck raised his head, wheeled around, and catching sight of Jack standing on the edge of the clearing, came at him almost as fast as an express train. He had been only slightly wounded, and, full of rage, he had only one desire—to annihilate the person responsible for the stinging pain he felt.

Jack saw him coming, and threw down the lever of his rifle to pump another cartridge into the chamber. But, to his horror, the lever refused to work. It had become jammed in some way, and the exploded shell could not be ejected. He pulled and tugged at it, the buck coming nearer by leaps and bounds.

“Jump—jump!” Jack heard Will cry, and realizing that he could not get in another shot, he leaped to one side, hoping to get out of the way of the infuriated

animal.

But his foot caught in the entangled branch of a bush, and he fell backward, full length, right in the path of the advancing buck, that was snorting with rage.

Jack tried to roll over, but the bush held him fast. He felt that it was all up with him, and he closed his eyes, expecting the next instant to feel the buck leap on him, to pierce him with its keen hoofs.

Jack could hear the thundering approach of the big creature, and he could feel the tremor of the ground as the brute came nearer. He fancied he could see the big bulk in the air over him.

Then there sounded a sharp crack, followed by a thud, and the black shape seemed to pass to one side. There was a shock as a big body hit the ground, a great crashing among the bushes, and Jack opened his eyes to see the buck lying dead a few feet away from him.

Then he saw something else. It was Will, running toward him, a smoking rifle in his hands.

“Are you—are you all right?” asked Will, his voice trembling.

“Yes,” said Jack, hardly able to speak, because of the reaction of the shock through which he had just passed. “I’m all right. Did you shoot the buck?”

“I—I guess so,” replied Will with a nervous laugh. “I aimed my rifle at him and pulled the trigger, anyhow.”

Jack went over to the big body, that had not ceased quivering.

“Right through the heart,” he said, as he saw where the bullet had gone in. “Bill, you saved my life!”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BLIZZARD

Jack extended his hand, and clasped that of Will's in a firm grip.

"This would have ended my hunting days if you hadn't fired," he said.

"Maybe he would have leaped over you," said Will. "He was coming very fast."

"I saw he was. He'd have jumped right on me, too, and that would have been the finish of yours truly. My, but that was a crack shot of yours."

"I didn't seem to take any aim. As soon as I saw him coming for you, I seemed to get steady all at once, and I didn't tremble a bit."

"Lucky for me you didn't. My rifle went back on me just at the wrong minute."

"What's the matter with it?"

"I don't know. I must take a look. It's risky to be hunting with such a rifle."

Jack looked for the cause of the trouble, and found that in taking the gun apart to clean it he had not screwed in far enough a certain bolt, which projected and prevented the breech mechanism from working. The trouble was soon remedied, and the rifle was ready for use again.

"Well, you can shoot the next buck," remarked Will as the two looked at the carcass of the big animal.

"Not to-day. I'd shake worse than you did if I tried to aim. We'll do no more hunting to-day. We'll go back and get Nat, and take this to camp. There's enough for a week."

It was with no little difficulty that the three boys loaded the best parts of the buck on their horses and started back to camp. They found that Sam and Bony had arrived ahead of them, Sam having killed a fine ram.

"Well, I know what I'm going to do to-day," remarked Jack the next morning.

“What?” inquired Nat.

“I’m going to have another try at that mystery.”

“Do you think it’ll be safe?”

“I don’t see why. I’m going to try to get to that camp from another trail, and if they see me the worst they can do will be to order me away again.”

“I’m with you,” declared Nat, and the others agreed to accompany the senior member of the gun club.

They started directly after breakfast, Jack, Nat, Sam, Bony and Will. Jack, making inquiries of Long Gun, learned of another trail that could be taken. They rode along this for several miles, and then proceeded cautiously, as they judged they were near where the hostile men had their camp.

Suddenly Nat, who was riding along beside Jack, stopped his horse and began sniffing the air.

“Smell anything?” he asked his chum.

Jack took several long breaths. Then he nodded.

“Gasolene, eh?” questioned Nat. “Cæsar’s pancakes! but I believe we’re on the track of those same bogus certificate printers again!”

“It can’t be,” declared Jack.

“But smell the gasolene.”

“I know it, but it might be from an automobile.”

“An automobile out here? Nonsense! Listen, you can hear the pounding of the engine.”

Certainly there was an odd throbbing noise, but just as Jack was beginning to locate it again the sound ceased.

“Never mind, fellows,” he said. “We’ll follow the smell of the gasolene. I don’t believe it’s the same gang that we were on the trail of before, but we’ll soon find out. Keep together, now.”

They went on for perhaps half a mile farther, when there was a sudden motion among the bushes on the trail ahead of them, and a man's voice called out:

"Halt!"

It was one of the three men who had, a few days previous, warned Jack and Nat away.

"Where are you going?" the man demanded.

"We were looking for your camp," said Jack boldly.

"Our camp?"

The man seemed much surprised.

"Yes. We wanted to see what sort of a place you had. We smelled the gasoline, and heard the engine, and——"

"Now look here!" exclaimed the man angrily. "You've been told once to keep away from here, and this is the second time. The next time you won't hear us tell you. We'll shoot without warning. And we won't shoot you, either, for we think you're here more out of curiosity than anything else, but we'll shoot your horses, and you know what it means to be without a horse out here. So if you know what's good for you, keep away."

"Yes," added another voice. "You'd better keep away from here, Jack Ranger, if you don't want to get into trouble."

"Oh, it's you, is it, Jerry Chowden?" spoke our hero. "I wonder if your new friends know as much about you as we do?"

"Never you mind!" exclaimed Jerry quickly. "You mind your own business, and let me alone."

"That's what I've often wished you to do for me," spoke Jack. "Do you know that there is a warrant out for your arrest if you ever come back in the neighborhood of Denton?"

Jerry gave a frightened look over his shoulder. The man who had halted the lads had stepped back into the bushes.

“You clear out of here, Jack Ranger. And you, too, Nat Anderson and the rest of the bunch!” snapped Jerry, and then he drew from his pocket a revolver.

“Look out, Jerry, that might go off,” remarked Jack with a laugh.

“Don’t you make fun of me!” ordered the bully. “I’m working here, and I’ve got authority to order you away.”

“That’s right, Jerry, tell ’em to vamoose,” added the man who had first spoken, as he again came into view. “We don’t want any spies around here.”

Another man joined the first, and the two looked angrily at the intruders. They were armed with shotguns.

“What do you want?” asked the second man.

“Oh,” said Nat lightly, “we just came to call on an acquaintance of ours—Jerry Chowden. The police back East would like to see him, and we’ve just told him.”

“That’s not so!” cried Jerry angrily.

“You’re afraid to go back,” added Jack.

“I am not! You mind your own business and clear out!”

“Yes, move on,” ordered the first man, but Jack noted that he looked closely at Jerry, as if to determine the effect of the charges made against the bully.

There seemed to be nothing else to do, and the boys turned back.

“Beaten again,” remarked Jack, as they headed for camp. “Well, there’s just one other way of discovering their secret.”

“What is it?” asked Nat.

“Go down the mountain, directly back of their camp, only it’s dangerous because it’s so steep. We can’t take the horses. I’ll try that way, however, before I’ll let Jerry Chowden laugh at us.”

“So will I,” answered Nat, and Sam and Bony said the same thing.

“I think we’re in for a storm,” remarked Will as they jogged along. “It’s

beginning to snow.”

A few flakes were sifting lazily down, and they increased by the time the boys reached camp, where they found Budge and Long Gun busy tightening the tent ropes and piling the wood and provisions within the smaller supply tent.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jack.

“Storm comin’,” replied the Indian. “Plenty much bad. Git ready.”

Early the next morning Jack and his chums were awakened by the wind howling about their tent. It was cold, in spite of heavy blankets and thick clothing.

“B-r-r-r!” exclaimed Jack as he crawled out and went to the flap of the tent. Then he gave a startled cry.

“Boys, it’s a regular blizzard!” he said.

Nothing could be seen but a white wall of fiercely swirling snowflakes, while the wind was howling through the trees, threatening every minute to collapse the tent. But Long Gun had done his work well, and the canvas shelter stood.

CHAPTER XXX

JACK'S HAZARDOUS PLAN

The boys crowded up around Jack and peered through an opening in the tent flap.

“Blizzard! I should say so!” exclaimed Nat. “It’s fierce! How are we going to cook any breakfast?”

“Me show,” answered Long Gun with a grin. Then he pointed to where he and Budge, the day before, had constructed, inside the living tent, a small fireplace of stones and earth. There was a piece of pipe that extended outside the canvas wall, and in the improvised stove a blaze was soon started, over which coffee was made, and some bacon fried.

“Let’s go out and see what it’s like,” proposed Sam, as he wrapped himself up warmly.

“No go far,” cautioned Long Gun. “No git back if yo’ do. Heap bad storm.”

“There’s no danger of Sam going too far,” said Jack. “He’s too fond of the warm stove.”

“Get out!” replied Sam. “I can stand as much cold as you can.”

But none of the boys cared to be long in that biting cold, for the wind sent the snowflakes into their faces with stinging force, and the white crystals came down so thickly that had they gone far from the tent it is doubtful if they could have found their way back again.

The horses were sheltered in a shack that had been built of saplings, with leaves and earth banked around it and on the roof, and the animals, huddled closely together, were warm and comfortable.

Inside the big tent, where the members of the gun club stayed, it was not cold, for Long Gun and Budge kept the fire going in the stone stove, and as the tent was well banked around the bottom, but little of the biting wind entered.

Nothing could be done, as it was not safe to venture out, so the boys put in the day cleaning their guns, polishing some of the horn trophies they had secured, and talking of what had happened so far on their camping trip.

Toward evening Long Gun went out to the supply tent to get some meat to cook. He came back in a hurry, his face showing much surprise.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jack quickly.

“Meat gone!” exclaimed the Indian. “Something take him from tent.”

The boys rushed out into the storm toward the smaller canvas shelter where their food and supplies were kept. One side had been torn down, and within there was a scene of confusion.

In the fierceness of the storm, while the campers had been in the big tent, some wild beast, or, perhaps, several of them, had stolen up and carried away most of the food on which Jack and his chums depended. Nor could it be said what beasts had robbed them, for their tracks were obliterated by the snow that had fallen since.

“Well, this is tough luck!” exclaimed Jack. “What are we going to do now?”

“There’s some bacon left from breakfast,” said Budge. “Have to eat that, I guess.”

“Yes; and, thank goodness, the thieves didn’t care for coffee,” added Nat. “We sha’n’t starve, at least, to-night.”

“There’s some canned stuff left, too,” went on Will.

“But it won’t last long, if this storm keeps up,” spoke Jack seriously. “I guess we’re going to be up against it, fellows.”

“Like fish?” asked Long Gun suddenly.

“What have fish got to do with it?” inquired Bony.

“Catch fish through ice soon. Storm stop,” replied the Indian. “River plenty full fish.”

“That’s a good idea,” commented Jack. “But when will the blizzard stop?”

It kept up all that night and part of the next day. The campers were on short rations, as regards meat, though there was plenty of canned baked beans, and enough hardtack for some time yet, while there was flour that could be made into biscuits. But they needed meat, or something like it, in that cold climate.

It was late the next afternoon when Jack, looking from the tent, announced:

“Hurrah, fellows! It’s stopped snowing, and the wind has gone down. Now for some fish through the ice. Long Gun, come on and show us how.”

The Indian got some lines and hooks ready, using salt pork for bait. Then the whole party went down to the river, traveling on snowshoes, for there was a great depth to the snow, and it was quite soft.

It was no easy task to scrape away the white blanket and get down to the ice that covered the river, but they managed it. Holes were chopped in the frozen surface of the stream, and then they all began to fish. They had good luck, and soon had caught enough of the finny residents of the Shoshone to make a good meal.

“Um-um!” exclaimed Bony, as they sat down to supper a little later. “Maybe this doesn’t taste fine!” and he extended his plate for some more of the fish, fried brown in corn meal, with bacon as a flavoring.

The next day Jack, Nat and Sam went out and killed some jack-rabbits, and this served them until two days later, when Jack killed a fat ram and Will a small deer.

All danger of a short food supply was thus obviated, and, the damaged tent having been repaired, the boys prepared to resume their hunt.

“We’ve only about three weeks more,” announced Jack one night. “If we stay much longer we may get snowed in and have to stay until spring.”

“Well, that wouldn’t be so bad,” spoke Bony.

“I know why Jack wants to start back,” spoke Sam. “He is going to stop at Pryor’s Gap and see a certain party with brown eyes, who——”

Then Sam dodged to avoid the snowshoe which his chum threw across the tent at him.

“When are we going to make another try to discover the secret of the strange camp?” asked Nat when quiet was restored.

“That’s so. When?” asked Will. “We haven’t heard that queer noise lately.”

“We’ll see what we can do to-morrow,” answered Jack.

That night the lads were startled by again hearing that strange sound in the air over their camp. But this time it seemed farther away, and only lasted a short time, while Jack, who rushed out the moment he heard it, could discover nothing.

Jack, Nat, Sam, Bony and Will started off early the next morning on snowshoes for the top of the mountain, in accordance with a plan Jack had formed of trying to reach the camp of the men from a point directly back of the place whence they had been ordered away.

They reached the summit of the mountain and found, as Long Gun had said they would, a trail leading directly down. But it was so steep and so covered with snow that it seemed risky to attempt it.

“We can never get down there,” said Nat.

“Sure we can,” declared Jack.

“We might if we had some of those long, wooden snowshoes, like barrel-staves, which the Norwegians use,” spoke Sam. “Otherwise I don’t see how we’re going to do it.”

Jack did not reply. Instead he was walking slowly along what seemed to be an abandoned trail. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation.

“The very thing!” he cried.

“What?” asked Bony.

“That old sled,” answered Jack, pointing to a sort of bobsled, that had evidently been made by lumbermen. It consisted of a platform of slabs, on long, broad, wooden runners, and stood near an abandoned camp.

“How can we use that?” asked Nat.

“Get on it and slide down the mountain,” daringly proposed Jack. “There’s plenty of snow. The old sled will hold us all, and maybe we can ride right into their camp lickity-split. Then they can’t put us out until we’ve seen what’s going on. Will you go?”

The boys hesitated a moment. It was a hazardous plan, one fraught with danger, but they were not the lads to draw back for that. It seemed the only feasible way of getting down the mountain.

CHAPTER XXXI

A PERILOUS RIDE

“Well,” asked Jack again, “will you go, or do I have to take the trip alone?”

“I’ll go!” cried Nat suddenly.

“And I!” “And I!” “And I!” added Bony, Sam and Will.

“Then let’s get the sled out and look it over,” said Jack.

The old sled seemed to be in fairly good condition. It was roughly but strongly made, as it had to be to stand dragging over the mountain trails. The boys hauled it to the edge of the slope.

“Get on,” called Jack as he began piling upon the flat top his gun and a package of food he had brought along.

“Wait a minute,” proposed Nat.

“What’s the matter now?” inquired Jack. “You’re not going to back out, are you?”

“No, but it just occurred to me that we’d better have some sort of a brake on this thing. If we get going down that mountain we might not be able to stop.”

“We don’t want to, until we get to the camp.”

“But s’pose we get to a ravine, or something like that?”

“Well, I guess it would be better to have a brake or drag,” admitted Jack. “I’ll tell you how we can make one. Get a long sapling, sharpen one end, and put it down through a hole in the back of the sled. When you want to stop, just jab it into the ground, and it will scrape along.”

“Better have two, while you’re at it,” said Sam. “Then we can steer with them by jabbing first one, then the other down. They will slew us around whichever way we want to go.”

“Fine!” cried Jack, always willing to give any of his chums the credit for a good invention. “We’ll do it.”

With a small hatchet, which they had brought with them, two stout saplings were cut, trimmed of their branches and sharpened to points. Then they were thrust down holes in the rear of the sled, near where the wooden runners came to an end.

“Now I guess we’re all ready,” remarked Jack as he surveyed the work. “Get aboard, fellows, for the Snow Sled Limited. No stops this side of Chicago.”

“And maybe not there, if we get going too fast,” spoke Bony grimly.

They had taken off their snowshoes, and piled them on the bob, with their guns and packages of food. Then the boys took their places.

“All ready?” asked Jack as he took his seat in front.

“As ready as we ever shall be,” replied Will, who was a trifle nervous.

“Then push off, Sam,” called Jack, for Sam and Nat had taken their places at the two brake poles. They used them to shove the sled nearer the edge of the hill, and then, as the sled began to move, they slipped the sharpened saplings into the holes again.

Slowly the sled began to go down the hill. At first the slope was gradual, and the speed was not great. Then, as the side of the mountain became more steep, the bob gathered headway, until it was moving along swiftly.

“Hold on, everybody!” cried Jack. “There’s a bump just ahead of us!”

The warning came only just in time, for the sled reached a sort of ridge in the slope, and bounded up in the air. The boys went with it, and as they stayed up a little longer than the sled did, when they came down they did so with considerable force, so that the breath was nearly shaken out of them.

“Ouch!” cried Nat. “I bit my tongue.”

“Lucky it’s no worse,” spoke Jack. “Did we lose anything off the sled, Will?”

“No, but your gun came near going,” for the food and other objects had slid

around when the jolt came. "I held on to them," went on the strange lad, who, from the association of Jack and his chums, was fast losing his odd manner.

"That's the idea! Well, we certainly are moving now."

And indeed they were. The sled was increasing its speed every moment, and was now whizzing along over the snow like some racing automobile, but with none of the noise. The snow, by reason of thawing and freezing, had acquired a hard, slippery surface, and the sled, the broad runners of which did not sink in, was fairly skimming along over it.

"Try the brakes!" Jack called back to Sam and Nat. "Let's see if they work."

"Put on brakes!" called Nat, giving vent to a couple of screeches in imitation of a whistle.

"That means let off brakes," said Sam. "One whistle is to put 'em on."

"What's the odds?" inquired Nat. "Put your pole down."

He was already shoving on his, and Sam did likewise. There was a shower of white flakes behind the sled as the sharp points of the poles bit into the snow. There followed a scratching sound, and two long depressions appeared to mark the wake of the bob. Then the speed began to slacken.

"They work all right," Jack announced. "We'll try how they steer, now."

"Off brakes!" shouted Sam, and he and Nat pulled up the poles.

Once more the sled shot forward, coasting down the side of the mountain. Bony sat beside Jack, in front, while Will was in the centre, surrounded by the guns and packages.

"Wow!" exclaimed Bony suddenly. "There's a bad place just ahead."

"I see," remarked Jack. "We must go to one side of it."

The place was a little hollow in the face of the mountain, and if the sled, which was headed directly for it, dipped down into it, there might be a serious accident.

"Jab your pole down, Nat!" cried Jack, as he calculated to which side of the hollow it was best to pass. "Jab it hard."

“Hard it is!” repeated Nat, as he bore down on his pole with all his force.

The result was more than they bargained for. The sled slewed suddenly around, and only by clinging desperately to it did the boys manage to save themselves from being spilled off.

“Let go!” yelled Jack quickly.

“Let go it is!” Nat managed to repeat, as he pulled up his pole.

The sled slung around straight again, and continued to slide, but the steering had been successful, for they passed well to one side of the hole.

“I guess a light jab will be all we’ll need to change the course of this schooner,” remarked Bony. “No more of those ‘hard ’a port’ orders, Jack.”

“That’s right. We had a narrow escape.”

On and on they went, Jack watching carefully for holes or rocks, that he might call orders to steer to one side or the other of them. The sled answered her “helm” readily, and, when there was need to slacken speed, the same poles served as brakes.

There was still a long snowy stretch before them, though they had come a mile or more. It was fully five miles to the bottom of the slope, where the valley began and where they knew the mysterious men were encamped.

The course they were on led almost straight down, and, by some curious freak of nature, it was quite like a cleared road down the side of the mountain. There were few trees in the path the sled was taking, and it seemed as if, in ages gone by, a great snowslide or avalanche had gone crashing down the declivity, preparing a path upon which, however, few would have ventured.

Now the speed, which had slackened on a place where the slope was not so great, became faster. The wind whistled in the ears of the boys, and the broad runners were throwing up a fine shower of frozen snow.

Faster and faster the bob went. It was skimming along like a great bird now, and the course was so clear that there was no need of steering.

Suddenly Jack spied, just ahead of them, a great boulder, partly covered with

snow. To strike it meant a disaster, and the sled was headed right for it.

“Sam! Sam!” cried Jack. “Put your pole down.”

This would slew the sled to one side. Sam, bearing in mind what had happened when Nat put his sapling down too suddenly, gently dug his point into the snow. But, so great was the speed, that the sled was slewed around almost as badly as before.

But it cleared the rock, and then righted itself.

“Say, but we’re going some,” remarked Bony.

Jack nodded.

“Too fast,” he called. “Put on the brakes, fellows.”

Nat and Sam prepared to obey this order. They bore down on the saplings, but the sled seemed only to go the faster.

“Put on brakes! Hard!” yelled Jack.

“We’re trying to,” called Sam.

He and Nat bore down with all their force. They could hear the ends of the saplings scraping over the frozen snow, but they did not seem to take hold. There was no shower of frozen crystals—no depressions behind the runners.

“THE SLED WENT FASTER AND FASTER.”

The sled went faster and faster. Then Nat understood.

“The points of the brakes are worn off!” he cried. “They won’t take hold!”

“Take ’em up and sharpen ’em!” shouted Jack. “We’ve got to slacken up or we’ll be hurt! Sharpen the stakes.”

It was the only thing to do. The points of the poles, dragging over the hard snow, had been worn flat and smooth. It was hard work, putting points on them, aboard the swaying bob, but Sam and Nat, aided by Bony and Will, managed to do it with the hatchet. All the while the sled was skimming along, faster and faster.

“Jab ’em in! Jab ’em in!” yelled Jack desperately.

Nat and Sam did so. There was a scraping sound, as the sharp points bit into the snow, but the speed of the sled did not seem to slacken.

“The snow’s frozen too hard!” cried Nat. “We can’t stop it now!”

“You’ve got to!” yelled Jack. “We’re going like greased lightning!”

But, try as Nat and Sam did, they could not force the newly-sharpened stakes into the ground. Jack, Bony and Will added their strength, but it was of no use.

Faster and faster the sled leaped down the slope. The wind cut the faces of the boys, and the flying particles of snow, freed by the edges of the runners, stung them like needles.

“We can’t stop!” said Nat, hopelessly.

Straight as an arrow flew the sled.

“Look! Look!” cried Will, and he pointed ahead.

There, right in the path, and not a quarter of a mile away, at the foot of the hill down which they were shooting like a rocket, was a patch of blackness.

“It’s a lake! A lake of open water!” cried Jack. “Get ready to jump!”

CHAPTER XXXII

INTO A STRANGE CAMP

It seemed that this was the only thing to do. To remain on the sled, as it plunged into the black water, might mean that they would be drawn down into the depths, never to come up. So the lads prepared to leap from the swiftly-moving sled.

Yet they would not jump without their guns, and they hesitated a moment while they secured them. Then they moved to the edge of the bob.

But to leap from it, while it was traveling almost with the speed of a railroad train, meant no little risk. No wonder they hesitated, especially as there was no place to land but on the hard, frozen surface of the snow, down which they were sliding.

Still, it was a choice of two desperate expedients, and, as they supposed, they were choosing the lesser evil.

“Here we go!” cried Nat, as he crouched for a spring.

“No! Wait! Wait!” almost screamed Jack. “That’s not water! It’s ice! It’s ice! We’re all right! Stay on!”

He had called only just in time, for, as the sled came nearer to the black patch, he had seen, from the glint of light upon its surface, that it was hard, black, thick ice.

A moment later the sled, striking a little hollow place bounded into the air. It came down with a thump, and in another second was skimming over the frozen surface of a little pond. Straight across it flew, into a snow bank on the other side, where it came to an abrupt stop.

So sudden, in fact, was the halting, that Will, who was near the front end, was shot from the bob, and came down in the bank of snow, head first.

“Pull him out!” cried Jack, as he leaped off.

“Maybe he’s hurt.”

The others hastened to the aid of their chum, and he was soon hauled out. He seemed dazed, and there was blood coming from a cut on his head.

“Hurt much?” asked Jack anxiously.

“No—not much—hit my head on a stone under that pile of snow, I guess. But where are we?”

“Where we started for, I think,” replied Jack. “My, but that was a trip!”

“Petrified pole-cats! I should say so!” ejaculated Nat. “I thought we were goners!”

“Same here,” remarked Sam. “But we don’t seem to have arrived at any place.”

“We’re at the foot of the hill,” spoke Bony. “That’s something,” and he tried to crack his knuckle joints, forgetting that he had thick mittens on.

“Let’s see what’s beyond those trees,” proposed Jack, after they had rested, and he pointed to some dark pines that fringed one shore of the pond. “Bring your guns, fellows, and come on.”

“What about the grub?” asked Nat.

“Leave it on the sled,” replied Jack. “We’ll probably come back here.”

He led the way to the trees, and passed beyond the natural screen they formed, followed by his chums. No sooner had he penetrated the thick branches, than he uttered a cry of surprise. And well he might.

For in front of the young hunters was a strange camp, a large one, consisting of a big shed-like structure, with several small log cabins grouped around it. And the place smelled of gasoline, while from one of the cabins came a noise of machinery in operation.

“Boys!” exclaimed Jack, “we’ve found the place.”

“Yes, and there doesn’t seem to be anybody here to stop us,” remarked Nat.

They stood for a few moments on the edge of the camp, the secret of which they

had tried to solve several times before.

“Come on,” said Jack. “Might as well take it all in.”

As he spoke the doors of the big shed swung slowly open. The boys saw a man pushing the portals, but something else they saw attracted their attention, and held them spellbound.

For the “something” was a great bird-like creature in the shed, a creature with an immense spread of wings, and from the big structure there came a peculiar throbbing noise, such as that they had heard in the air over their camp several nights.

“There it is!” exclaimed Nat. “There’s the monster that’s been flying in the air over our heads! They’ve got it captive, and they’re trying to tame it!”

The doors opened wider, the man pushing them with his back to the boys, so that at first he did not see them.

“Wow! Aunt Jerusha’s Johnnie cake!” exclaimed Nat. “See that bird.”

Inside the shed the great creature appeared to be fluttering its wings.

The boys were peering forward eagerly. Suddenly there sounded a shout, and from one of the cabins a figure ran.

“Jerry Chowden!” cried Jack.

Jerry had seen the boys. Pointing one hand at them, he yelled something to the man opening the shed doors. In an instant the man turned, went back into the shed, and the doors swung shut. Then, from other cabins came several men, running toward Jack and his chums. Jerry joined them.

“We’re in for it, now,” remarked Nat.

“Keep cool,” advised Jack. “They can’t hurt us.”

“That’s them! They’re the same fellows!” exclaimed Jerry, as he ran up.

“Glad to see that you recognize us,” remarked Jack calmly. “I was afraid you’d forgotten us, Jerry.”

“Hu! Think you’re smart, don’t you?” sneered the former bully of Washington Hall.

“None of this chinning!” exclaimed one of the men sullenly. “How did you chaps get here, this time?”

“Slid,” replied Jack laconically.

“Don’t get fresh. It might not be healthy.”

“That’s a fact,” went on Jack. “We slid down the side of the mountain on a sled, and landed on your little lake back of the trees.”

“You never did it!” exclaimed the man incredulously.

“Well,” said Jack slowly, “if you don’t believe it you can go back there and look at the lake.”

“Yes,” added Nat, “and if that doesn’t convince you, you can go look at the mountain, and see the sled.”

The man turned, and spoke a few words in a low voice to one of his companions. The latter set off toward the fringe of trees.

“Now, what did you chaps come here for?” went on the spokesman.

“To see your big bird fly,” replied Jack.

The man started.

“We haven’t any big bird,” he said.

“Looks mighty like one, in that shed,” went on Jack.

The man scowled. Then he resumed.

“Weren’t you warned to keep away from here before? Weren’t you told that your horses would be shot if you came?”

“Yes,” answered Jack, smiling a bit, “but you see we haven’t any horses with us now.”

“Hu! That’s a mighty poor joke,” sneered the man.

“I don’t think much of it myself, but it was the best I could make under the circumstances.”

Jack was as cool as a cucumber, while the man was visibly losing his temper.

“Lock ’em up!” burst out Jerry Chowden. “That Ranger fellow and Nat Anderson are always making trouble.”

“Say, when I want your advice I’ll ask for it,” said the man curtly. Just then the individual he had sent off to report about the sled came back.

“It’s there,” he said.

“Hum!” murmured the other. Then, turning to the group of men about him he said: “Better take ’em, and put ’em in one of the vacant cabins for the time being. Then I’ll decide what to do with them.”

“You haven’t any right to touch us, or detain us!” exclaimed Jack.

“We haven’t, eh? Well we’re going to take the right, just the same. You put your head in the lion’s mouth, and now you are going to be lucky if he doesn’t bite it off. Lock ’em up, men.”

Several of the roughly-dressed men advanced toward the group of boys. Jack’s chums looked to him for advice. He had gotten them into the difficulty, and it was up to him to get them out.

“See here!” exclaimed our hero boldly. “Don’t you lay hands on us. We are camping on this mountain, and I happen to know that it’s government land, and that any one has a right to travel all around it. We have just as much right here as you have, and if you annoy us I’ll appeal to the law.”

“There ain’t no law out here, sonny,” said one man. “You are suspicious characters, anyhow. Better not make a fuss now. We’re too many for you. Next time mind your own affairs and you’ll not get into trouble.”

The men had seized Nat, Bony, Sam and were advancing toward Will and Jack, who stood a little to one side of their chums.

One man laid hold of Jack, and our hero tried to wrench himself free. But the man was too strong for him.

Suddenly Will looked across the camp. He saw the man again coming from the big shed. For a moment it seemed as if the lad had seen a ghost, his eyes stared so. Then, with a cry he sprang forward, and ran toward the person near the big shed.

“Catch him!” shouted the man who had directed that the boys be made prisoners. “He’s locoed—crazy!”

“Andy will look after him! He’s running right into his arms,” said some one, and sure enough, the man did catch Will in his arms. The next moment the two disappeared inside the big shed.

Jack and his chums looked at one another.

“He must have gone suddenly out of his head,” said Jack. “That blow he got when he landed in the snow bank has crazed him.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

HELD CAPTIVES

“Now then, you chaps; are you going to come along quietly, or will we have to use force?” demanded the man who had hold of Jack.

“It depends on what you’re going to do with us,” replied the captain of the gun club.

“Well, I don’t know what we are going to do with you,” answered the man. “It will depend on what Andy says.”

“Who’s Andy?”

“That man who just captured your friend—the lad that tried to get away.”

“Look here!” burst out Nat. “If you hurt Will, or any of us, we’ll have you arrested. Hoptoads and hornets! but you haven’t any right to treat us this way.”

“Say, sonny, don’t use such big words, or you might break an arm or leg,” spoke the man sarcastically. “I’ve told you once that you hadn’t any right to come here, but now that you’re here, you’ll have to put up with the consequences. You’ll have to stay here, until Andy decides what to do with you.”

“Well, you’d better go ask him to decide at once,” suggested Sam. “We’ve got a long way to go back to camp, and we want to start.”

“Now just take your time,” advised the man. “You’re not running this.”

He took off his cap, and scratched his head in perplexity. He had a shock of thick, red hair, and for want of a better name, since he had not announced it, the lads dubbed him Sandy.

“Was that Andy, as you call him, who went in the big shed with Will?” asked Jack.

“That’s him. He’ll have to decide what to do with you, for I’m blessed if I know. He’s the boss.”

“Then go ask him,” demanded Jack, backing up Sam’s suggestion.

“I can’t,” was the reply.

“Why not?”

“Because Andy has given orders that no one but himself is allowed inside that shed, except on certain occasions.”

“Is he afraid the big bird will get away?” asked Nat.

“What big bird?” inquired Sandy quickly. He took a tighter grip of Jack’s arm, and the other men in the group, each of whom held one of the young captives, seemed waiting for Nat’s reply.

“Oh, we know you’ve got some kind of a monster bird in that shed,” went on Nat. “We heard it flying over our camp, and we came out here to see it.”

“Is that all you came for?” asked Sandy.

“That’s all,” put in Jack. “We wanted to solve the mystery of the strange noises, and the queer marks in the snow.”

“What queer marks in the snow?”

Jack told Sandy what he and his chums had seen, relating in detail how they had tried, on several occasions, to penetrate to the camp, and how, at length, they had made the trip on the sled.

“Now why don’t you go tell Andy, who seems to be the head of this crowd, what I say, and ask him to let us go?” went on Jack. “We meant no harm, but we’d like to see the bird.”

“So you think it’s a bird; eh?”

“Yes, or perhaps some prehistoric monster.”

Sandy laughed.

“You’re right in thinking Andy is the head of this camp,” he said. “We’re all working for him, but, as I said, he won’t let one of us go inside that shed without his orders. Since your friend went in there he’ll have to stay until Andy brings

him out. Then you can make your own plea. Until then I'm going——”

“If you're going to hold us prisoners, you'd better think twice about it,” went on Jack. “My father has friends out West here, and I shall telegraph him of this outrage as soon as I get away.”

“Now go easy,” advised the red-haired man. “I'm not going to harm any of you, but I'm not going to let you get away until Andy has seen you. You'll have to stay here, but we'll make you as comfortable as possible. I guess you can stay in one of the cabins. There are some of them empty, as a number of the men have left.”

“Then we're captives?” asked Jack.

“Well, I wouldn't exactly call it that,” spoke Sandy with a grin. “Just consider yourselves our guests. We'll treat you well, and give you plenty of grub, such as it is.”

“We have some of our own,” Bony said.

“You haven't any right to detain us,” declared Sam.

“We won't discuss that again,” said Sandy. “Now be reasonable. S'pose I did let you go. You couldn't get back to your camp to-night, over the mountain, and without horses. You'd have to camp in the open. Isn't it better to stay in one of our cabins, where it's nice and warm? Besides, it looks like a storm.”

Jack could not but admit that this reasoning was good. They had not counted on getting back, after their trip on the sled, but it was obvious that they could not coast back to camp, and if they had started to return, they would have had to pass the night in an open camp, no very pleasant prospect.

“Well,” said Jack at length, “I guess we'll have to stay. But I don't like the idea of being considered prisoners.”

“Well, don't think of it then,” advised Sandy with another grin. “Now, you're free. I let you go. Where will you head for?”

He released Jack's arm, and motioned for his companions to do likewise for the other lads.

Jack looked about him. Clearly there was no place to escape to. Besides, it would never do to go off and leave Will in the hands of the enemy. There was nothing to do but to stay.

“Now, then,” went on Sandy, “you can go to that cabin over there,” and he pointed to a large one. “You’ll find some bunks there, a good fireplace, and some grub. Or you can use your own provisions, just as you like. All I ask is that you give me your word of honor that you’ll not leave without telling me first. It may be that Andy won’t want you detained at all, but I’m taking no chances. Will you promise?”

“Will any harm come to Will?” asked Jack.

“You mean the lad who ran into the shed? I can’t say. I know Andy will be very much put out at his going there, but I don’t believe he’ll harm him. Now, will you give me your parole, or will I have to lock you up?”

Jack hesitated a moment.

“I haven’t any right to speak for my chums,” he said.

“Then take a few minutes to talk with them. We’ll leave you alone for five minutes, and you can give me your answer then.”

Sandy and his men withdrew a short distance, leaving the boys in a group by themselves.

“Well?” questioned Jack. “What shall we do?”

“I don’t see what we can do but give him our promise,” replied Sam. “It will be better to be by ourselves, and comparatively free, than to be locked up somewhere. Besides, we haven’t discovered the secret yet.”

“That’s so,” agreed Nat. “I want to see what’s in that shed.”

“And we may be better able to help Will, by being somewhat free,” added Bony. “I’m for giving our parole.”

“All right,” agreed Jack. “I think, myself, that will be the best plan. I wonder what in the world can be in that shed?”

“And I wonder what’s happening to Will in there?” added Nat. “We must find out, if possible.”

“We’ll give our parole,” called Jack to Sandy, and the red-haired man approached the group of boys alone, having motioned to his companions, on hearing this, that they could resume their occupations.

“That’s good,” answered the red-haired man, apparently much relieved. “Now you can go over there and make yourselves at home. You say you have some grub of your own. Fetch it, and get busy. Nobody will disturb you.”

“And you’ll speak to Andy about us, as soon as you can; won’t you?” asked Nat.

“Sure thing. You’re only in the way here, if you’ll excuse my saying so, and the sooner you’re off, the sooner we can go on with our work.”

The boys went to where they had left the sled, got the packages of food, and, with their guns, which had first been taken from them, and then restored, as they gave their parole, they went to the cabin Sandy indicated.

The red-haired man seemed to pay no further attention to them, but entered another cabin, near the big shed, while none of the other men were now in sight. Jerry Chowden had also disappeared.

“They’ve left us to ourselves,” remarked Jack.

“Yes,” added Sam. “I wonder what their ‘work’ can be?”

“It’s got something to do with that gigantic bird, I’m sure,” said Nat. “Queer, though, it doesn’t make some sound.”

“Maybe it’s dead,” suggested Bony, absently cracking his finger knuckles.

“No, for we saw the wings moving when the doors were open,” said Jack. “They were evidently just going to let it out, when they saw us.”

“But what puzzles me,” went on Nat, “is why Will ran off in that queer fashion.”

“And why they’re keeping him in that shed,” added Bony. “Why don’t they let him come here with us? We’re all in the same boat, as far as coming here is concerned.”

“Maybe they’re going to make an example of him,” suggested Nat.

“An example? What do you mean?” asked Jack.

“Well, you know they’ve got a terrible big bird, or some monster in there. Maybe they’re going to feed Will to it—offer him up as a sort of human sacrifice, you know. Maybe these men worship that strange bird.”

“Say, you’ve been reading too many dime novels,” cried Jack. “Offer Will for a sacrifice! You’re crazy to think of such a thing, Nat!”

“I don’t care. Didn’t the old Aztecs make human sacrifices?”

“Yes, but these men aren’t Aztecs.”

“How do you know?”

“How do I know? Of course they aren’t! They’re Americans, all right.”

“But they’ve got some queer secret in that shed,” declared Nat obstinately.

“True enough,” admitted Jack, “and we’re going to discover what it is, if possible. But now let’s get something to eat. I’m hungry.”

They found a good fireplace in the log cabin, and plenty of dry wood, and soon had a roaring blaze going. They prepared a simple meal, finding a sufficient supply of dishes in the place, and after eating heartily of the food they had brought along, they felt better. It was getting late in the afternoon, and they prepared to spend the night in the hut.

“I wonder if Budge and Long Gun will worry about our not coming back?” asked Sam.

“No,” replied Jack, “for I told Budge I didn’t see how we could return, in case we were successful in getting to the mysterious camp.”

“Well, we got here all right,” remarked Nat, with an uneasy laugh. “The question is, how to get away.”

“And rescue Will,” added Bony.

“Yes,” continued Jack, “I don’t like the way he acted. I’m afraid his brain was

affected by the blow on the head, following the fright at coming down on the sled. He isn't very strong, and it wouldn't take much to upset him. Besides, he's been worrying about finding his uncle, and about the mean way his guardian has treated him. I certainly hope nothing has happened to him in that shed, but I can't understand why that man Andy should keep him there."

The boys passed rather an uneasy night, not only because of their strange surroundings, but on account of worrying over the fate of Will. Nor were they altogether easy regarding themselves.

"Well, we're still alive, at any rate," observed Jack, as he arose the next morning, and helped to get a simple breakfast. "Did any of you fellows hear anything in the night?"

"It seems to me that I heard people sneaking around the cabin," said Bony.

"Same here," added Sam.

"Guess they didn't altogether trust us," came from Nat. "They looked in on us every once in a while. I wonder how Will slept?"

"Guess we'll have to wait to have that answered," remarked Jack. "If I see Sandy I'll ask him——"

He stopped suddenly, and looked from a window.

"Here comes Will now," he added.

"And that man Andy is with him!" exclaimed Sam. "Maybe now we'll solve the mystery."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED

Jack opened the cabin door, and stood in it, prepared to greet Will. The other captives gathered back of their chum.

“How are you, Will?” asked Jack, as soon as his friend came within speaking distance. “We were quite worried about you.”

“I’m all right,” answered the strange lad.

“Why did you run away?” inquired Sam, while Nat looked closely at Andy. The man had a good-natured, smiling face, and Nat’s spirits began to rise. He did not think they had much to fear from such a man.

“It’s a strange story,” said Will, as he entered the cabin, followed by the man.

The boys crowded around the two, and waited anxiously for Will’s next words.

“First,” began the lad, who had acted so strangely, “let me introduce to you my uncle, Mr. Andrew Swaim.”

“Your uncle!” exclaimed Jack.

“Your uncle!” echoed Sam, Bony and Nat.

“That’s right. My uncle, whom I ran away from home to seek,” went on Will. “I never expected to find him here.”

“Nor I to see my nephew,” explained Mr. Swaim. “I was never more surprised in my life than when he ran to me in the shed. After he had called me by name, he fainted dead away. He has been unconscious all night, and only a few minutes ago did he come to his senses. I remained at his bedside all the while. As soon as he roused, and felt better, he told me about coming here with you boys, and insisted that I come out to look for you. That was the first I knew you were still in my camp. I hope you haven’t suffered any inconvenience. I saw you as I was about to open the shed doors, but I supposed my men warned you away. I hope

you are not angry.”

“Not much,” replied Jack with a smile. “And so Will fainted as soon as he greeted you?”

“Yes. He explained later that he got a blow on the head, and that, together with the thrilling ride down the mountain, on top of the worry he had sustained in searching for me, and other hardships he had undergone, made him go temporarily out of his mind. But he is all right now, he says.”

“Yes, that’s what I am,” said Will. “All my troubles are over, now that I’ve found my uncle. What did you think, when I ran away?”

“We didn’t know what to think,” replied Jack. “Especially when you didn’t come back.”

“This is how it was,” explained Will. “I saw my uncle as soon as he began opening the big doors the second time. Before I knew what I was doing I had run toward him, and when I was near enough I called his name, and told him who I was. He recognized me at once, and——”

“Yes, and I saw that he was about to keel over,” interrupted Mr. Swaim. “I caught him in my arms, carried him inside the shed, and I had my hands full all night with him. I had given orders to my men never to enter that shed except on certain occasions. They did not disobey my instructions to tell me you boys were still here, and, of course, Will could tell me nothing until this morning. Then he insisted that we come out and find you. I called in Stephen——”

“Is that the red-haired man?” asked Jack.

“He is. I called him in, and he explained about you being in this cabin. And now here we are—Will and I, and I can’t thank you enough, Jack Ranger, for what you did for him. He has told me a little about it, and how kind you were to him in school. I shall have a score to settle with that rascally guardian of his. I never suspected Gabel could be so mean. But his charge of my nephew is ended. I will make other provisions for Will. Are you boys all right now? Did you have some breakfast?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Jack. “If we had known that Will’s uncle was in charge of this camp, we wouldn’t have——”

“Now don’t make any apologies,” interrupted Mr. Swaim. “It’s all right. I want you to make yourselves right to home here. My regulations were only intended for men who might try to spy on my work. For I am perfecting a means——”

“Fellows, you’ll never guess what the mystery is,” burst out Will. “Excuse me, Uncle Andy,” he went on, “but let me tell them. You see we’ve puzzled over it so long, and none of us could guess. Jack, Nat, Sam, Bony—what do you think it is that my uncle has in the big shed—the thing that flew over our camp and scared Long Gun so? See if you can guess.”

“A great bird—like the roc of the Arabian Nights,” said Nat.

“No.”

“Some sort of eagle, larger than any ever seen in these parts,” ventured Sam.

“No, that’s as far off as Nat was.”

“A kite, carrying an engine, working a camera, for taking moving pictures at night,” was Bony’s guess.

“No,” said Will. “It’s your turn, Jack.”

Jack thought for a minute. He glanced at the big shed, and then started, as a sudden idea came to him.

“A balloon?” he asked.

“No, but you’re nearest to it. Shall I tell them, Uncle Andy?”

Mr. Swaim nodded.

“It’s a great aeroplane!” exclaimed Will.

“An aeroplane!” exclaimed all the other lads in a breath.

“A new form of aeroplane, with propellers built like the great wings of a bird,” explained Mr. Swaim. “It’s an invention of mine, but is not perfected yet, though it flies fairly well. There are certain parts, on which I have not yet got my patents, and that is why I do not admit any of the men to the shed when the ‘*Eagle*’ as I call her, is there. But Will got in before I could stop him, though I guess he’ll not try to get ahead of his uncle.”

“No, indeed, Uncle Andy!”

“And did you fly it over our camp?” asked Jack.

“I did, and that was the sound you heard. It makes quite a whirring noise, when the wings are working fast, and the engine has a peculiar throbbing sound. I don’t wonder you and the Indian guide were frightened.”

“Oh, Long Gun was more scared than we were,” explained Nat.

“Probably. You see I only flew it at night, because I did not want any one to see it.”

“And it really works?” asked Bony.

“Yes, but not as well as I would like it to. I have only been able to take up myself and one other man, so far. I want it to carry at least five passengers, but I shall have to alter my engine, or change the shape of the wings, or else increase their size, before it will lift that much. But Stephen and I often flew over the mountain. We used to judge of our position by your camp-fire. At least I suppose, from what Will tells me, that it was your fire.”

“Yes,” said Jack. “We heard you calling to one another one night, and that kept us guessing more than ever.”

“What about those queer marks in the snow?” asked Bony.

Mr. Swaim looked puzzled until Jack explained.

“Oh,” said the inventor, “that was when we had an accident. The *Eagle* came down unexpectedly, and turned turtle. Neither I nor Stephen was hurt, but we had quite a time righting the machine. The marks you saw must have been the impressions of the wings in the snow.”

“We thought it was a great bird,” explained Nat.

“And I wasn’t so far out, calling it an eagle,” spoke Bony, cracking a couple of finger knuckles, and ending up with both thumbs.

“I have been out here in this secluded place for several months,” went on Mr. Swaim. “That is why I left no address for my nephew’s guardian, as I did not

want to be disturbed. I never supposed my nephew would try to find me, and he probably would not have done so, except by accident. But I will soon go back East, for my invention is almost perfected, and I want to give some exhibitions, and try for some government prizes. Would you boys like to see it tried?"

"You bet!" exclaimed Jack fervently, and the others nodded assent.

"We were going to give it a trial when you boys arrived here," went on Mr. Swaim. "Now that Will is all right, I think I will take the *Eagle* out for a flight. I was considerably worried," he continued, "when my men brought me reports of strangers trying to enter the camp, and I gave strict orders to keep them out. That is why my men were rather brusque with you."

"That's all right," answered Jack. "We had no right to come around, but we were very curious."

"I don't blame you. Well, I'll go and get the machine ready for a trial spin."

"Excuse me for mentioning it," said Jack, as Mr. Swaim prepared to leave the cabin, "but you have a chap here named Jerry Chowden? My friends and I used to know him."

"Is that so?" asked Mr. Swaim in some surprise. "I know little about him. He came to me one day, and asked for work, saying he needed money. As I was short of help I took him on, but I am sorry I did so, for my foreman tells me he is not worth his salt, and is lazy in the bargain. He never said anything to me about meeting you. I shall get rid of him, I think. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Well, I guess not!" exclaimed Jack heartily.

"I'm glad of it, for I don't like his manners. Now I'll go and see about taking the ship out. Will may remain with you."

The boys had plenty to talk about now. Their exchange of experiences of the incidents of the last few hours was interrupted by the appearance of the great aeroplane, as the men wheeled it out of the shed.

"Wow! Petrified pancakes!" exclaimed Nat. "That's a dandy, though!"

Indeed the *Eagle*, in spite of the fact that Mr. Swaim had said it was not completed, was a fine example of an aeroplane. The boys crowded up close to it,

examining the different parts, while Will's uncle and some of his men got it ready for a flight. As they started the motor, which worked the great wings, Nat said:

"That accounts for the gasoline smell. I guess the mystery is all explained now."

"It seems so," spoke Jack.

The aeroplane was taken to the ice-covered pond, over which the sled had slid on the finish of its perilous trip.

"Is that what this is for?" asked Jack.

"Yes," replied Mr. Swaim. "We cleared the snow off it on purpose to use for our trials. An aeroplane, you know, as at present constructed, has to get a start on the ground, in order to acquire enough momentum to rise. I find it much easier to skim along on the slippery ice, than over the ground. Well, are we all ready, Stephen?"

The red-haired man, who was the chief mechanic, nodded an assent. He and Mr. Swaim got into a seat, adjusted some levers and wheels, and then another man cranked up the motor.

The great propellers, built like the wings of a bird, began to work, with a sound that was exactly like that heard over the camp. The aeroplane slid forward, and after going for some distance over the frozen pond, rose into the air, as Mr. Swaim shifted the elevation rudders.

Up, up, up it went, until it was higher than the mountain down which the boys had slid. Then it began to circle about.

"My! But that's fine!" exclaimed Jack.

"Jupiter's Johnnie cake! But it certainly is!" exclaimed Nat fervently.

For half an hour or more Mr. Swaim circled about in the air overhead; then he and Stephen came down, landing on the pond with scarcely a jolt.

"What do you think of it?" asked the inventor proudly.

"It's great!" exclaimed Jack enthusiastically, and his chums echoed this

sentiment.

“Would you like to try a ride in it?” asked Will’s uncle.

“Well—er—not just now,” stammered Jack, and Mr. Swaim laughed.

“No, I wouldn’t want you to risk it, until I have perfected it a little more, though Stephen and I have gone twenty miles in it.”

One of the workmen ran up, and whispered something to Mr. Swaim.

“Is that so?” he asked, in some surprise. “Well, that simplifies matters. I have just been told,” he went on, turning to the boys, “that Jerry Chowden has disappeared. I guess he did not want to meet you lads.”

“I guess not,” said Jack significantly.

The boys spent some time further, examining the aeroplane, and visiting the machine shop, whence came the throbbing of a gasolene engine—the same sound they had heard when on their second visit to the camp.

Jack asked Will’s uncle if on any occasion he and Stephen had not landed near the camp, for Jack had in mind the occasion when the meat was stolen from the tree by the bear.

“Oh, was that your meat?” asked Mr. Swaim with a laugh, when Jack had explained. “We always wondered whom we had robbed. Stephen and I were out for a flight that night, and we had to descend because of an accident to the motor. We came down near the tree where the meat was, and surprised a bear at work getting it. Bruin scrambled down and ran away, and we concluded to take some of the meat, as we were short. Then we started the machine off again, and came here. I hope we didn’t put you to any inconvenience.”

“Oh, no,” replied Jack. “It only puzzled us some, that was all. But have you an arrow in hobnails, on the soles of your boots?”

Mr. Swaim lifted his foot and showed the arrow.

“That explains everything,” remarked Nat.

“Yes, the mystery is ended,” added Jack.

CHAPTER XXXV

JACK MEETS MABEL—CONCLUSION.

“Well,” remarked Mr. Swaim, when the aeroplane had been put back in the shed, “I’d like to have you boys come to dinner with me. We don’t have anything very elaborate in camp——”

“We don’t care for elaborate things,” interrupted Jack. “We’re camping on our own hook, and I was just thinking we had better begin to think of going back, or Budge and Long Gun may get worried, and start out after us.”

“I’d take you back in the aeroplane, only I can’t carry you all,” said Mr. Swaim. “However, let’s have dinner, and then you can decide what to do.”

The meal was much enjoyed, and at its conclusion, Will remarked:

“Have you decided what to do with me, Uncle Andy?”

“Well—no—not exactly,” replied Mr. Swaim. “Do you want to stay with me, or go back with your friends for a while? One thing is certain, you’ll not go back to that rascal of a Lewis Gabel. I’ll take you from his charge.”

“I’d like to go with Jack and his chums,” said Will, “only they’ll be going back East soon, I expect, and they haven’t got an extra horse for me to ride.”

“We can easily manage that,” said Jack. “I’ve got to send word to Tanker Ike to come and get our camp stuff, and he can just as well bring along an extra horse with him. So don’t let that worry you.”

“I’m afraid I’m giving you a lot of trouble,” said Will.

“Not a bit of it. Come, and welcome.”

“If you can manage it, I think it will be the best plan,” said Mr. Swaim. “My camp isn’t much of a place for a boy, but I will soon be coming East, Will, and then I’ll look after you. In the meanwhile take this to use for the spending money that Mr. Gabel wrongfully kept from you,” and he handed his nephew a

substantial sum.

The boys took a last look at the aeroplane, and bidding Mr. Swaim good-by, set off on a long tramp over the mountain for their camp. Fortunately the weather was fine, and they were not hampered by any storm, so they reached their tent late that afternoon.

“Jugitback?” asked Budge, as calmly as if they had been gone only an hour or so, and he pulled out a long string of gum, and began to work it back into his mouth again.

“Yes, we’re here,” said Jack. “Did you and Long Gun get along all right?”

“Sure’s you’re a foot high.”

“Well, we’ll soon begin packing for home——”

“Home? You mean Pryor’s Gap, I guess,” exclaimed Nat. “You’re not going without seeing Mabel; are you?”

“That’s none of your affair,” retorted Jack, his face reddening under his tan.

“We ought to have one more hunt before we go,” said Sam.

“That’s what,” put in Bony, and Jack agreed.

They spent two days more tramping over the mountains after game. Will killed a fair-sized bear, Nat got a large deer, and Jack bowled over a great ram, that had a fine pair of horns, which our hero declared he was perfectly satisfied with, as they would appropriately fill a certain space on the wall of his room.

“And now,” he said, as they were gathered around the camp fire that night, “I think the outing of our gun club is almost at an end.”

“Got to go to Pryor’s Gap yet!” murmured Nat from the shadows, and the rest of them laughed.

The next day Long Gun started on his horse to take word to Tanker Ike that the boys were ready to come back. He was gone two days, which the lads put in by packing up, and taking little trips, not far from their camp. The third day the Indian returned with the freight wagon, driven by Ike, who also brought along an

extra horse for Will.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “you certainly had great luck,” and he looked at the collection of skins and horns. “But it’s about time to go back. There’s a big storm coming, and it’ll be here soon.”

“We must take plenty of water this time, so if a tank springs a leak on the desert we won’t get thirsty,” said Sam.

“We’re not going to cross the desert,” spoke Jack.

“Why not?”

“Because we’re going back by way of Pryor’s Gap,” explained Jack boldly, and he did not heed the shouts of laughter that greeted his announcement. “We promised to call on Mr. Pierce, you know,” he added.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Pierce, with the accent on the *Mister*,” shouted Nat, and then he dodged behind the wagon to get out of Jack’s reach.

Two days later they were at Pryor’s Gap, and Mr. Pierce was glad to see them. He insisted that they stay several days at his house, to which Jack agreed. But his host did not see much of our hero, for, somehow, there were many sights of interest about the Gap, and no one seemed able to point them out to Jack, save a certain brown-eyed maiden—but there, what’s the use of rubbing it in?

“Well, I hope you lads will come camping out here again, soon,” said Mr. Pierce, as the members of the gun club prepared to take their leave.

“I hope we can,” said Jack. “We have enjoyed the hospitality of you and your daughter very much.”

“Especially the daughter,” put in Nat, in a voice intended only for Jack’s ear. “You old duffer, you monopolized her.”

“Humph!” exclaimed Jack. “Who had a better right?”

“Good-by, boys!” called Mr. Pierce.

“Good-by,” chorused the members of Jack Ranger’s gun club.

“Good-by,” spoke Mabel, with a blush, but she only looked at Jack. “Come

again.”

“We will,” said our hero decidedly, as he held her hand at parting a little longer than perhaps was strictly necessary. But, as we asked before, what’s the use of rubbing it in?

“We certainly had a great time,” observed Will, as they started off from Pryor’s Gap.

“The best ever,” agreed the others.

“I wonder what we’ll do next year,” spoke Sam.

But what they did will be told in the next volume of this series, to be entitled “Jack Ranger’s Treasure Box; or, The Outing of the Schoolboy Yachtsmen.” In that story we shall meet all our old friends again and learn the particulars of a most unusual mystery, and how it was solved.

A few days later the boys were in a train that was swiftly taking them back East, and to Washington Hall, which institution, as Jack learned in a letter from his father, that was waiting for him at Denver, had been repaired, and was ready for the students.

“Oh, dear, to think of going back to studies again,” sighed Nat, as he thought of the fun they had had.

“Never mind, we’ll have some sport yet,” consoled Jack. “Professors Socrat and Garlach are still available.”

“Yes, and think of the experience we have had,” said Will.

“Oh, well, we always have some sort of queer experience when we go out with Jack Ranger,” added Nat. “All out for Pryor’s Gap,” he shouted, as the train pulled into a station. Then he ducked down behind a seat to escape a wad of paper that Jack threw at him.

THE END

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