

FICTION

Edward Sylvester Ellis

The Campers Out

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK



eBookTakeAway

FICTION



THE NEXT MOMENT SOME ONE WAS SEEN HOLDING A LAMP IN HIS HAND

THE CAMPERS OUT
OR
THE RIGHT PATH AND THE WRONG

BY
EDWARD S. ELLIS, A. M.

Author of "True to His Trust,"
"Among the Esquimaux," etc.

THE PENN PUBLISHING COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA MDCCCXCVIII

Copyright 1893
by The Penn Publishing Company

CONTENTS

[I. The Plotters](#)
[II. How the Scheme Worked](#)
[III. A Startling Occurrence](#)
[IV. The Runaways](#)
[V. The Way of the Transgressor](#)
[VI. Sowing Seed](#)
[VII. One Afternoon in Autumn](#)
[VIII. Fellow-Passengers](#)
[IX. Dick Halliard](#)
[X. A Startling Summons](#)
[XI. No Joke](#)
[XII. The Victim of a Mistake](#)
[XIII. Adrift in the Swamp](#)
[XIV. Host and Guests](#)
[XV. The Forest Path](#)
[XVI. The Plotters](#)
[XVII. A Brave Exploit](#)
[XVIII. An Act of Forgetfulness](#)
[XIX. An Error of Judgment](#)
[XX. The Baying of a Hound](#)
[XXI. "Help! Help!"](#)
[XXII. Hot Quarters](#)
[XXIII. A Brilliant Shot](#)
[XXIV. Suspicious Footprints](#)
[XXV. Up a Tree](#)
[XXVI. Hunting the Hunters](#)
[XXVII. A Race for Life](#)
[XXVIII. A Cry from the Darkness](#)
[XXIX. A Sad Discovery](#)
[XXX. A Friend Indeed](#)
[XXXI. Dick Halliard Is Astounded](#)
[XXXII. How It Happened](#)
[XXXIII. Conclusion](#)

THE CAMPERS OUT

CHAPTER I--THE PLOTTERS

Jim McGovern was poring over his lesson one afternoon in the Ashton public school, perplexed by the thought that unless he mastered the problem on which he was engaged he would be kept after the dismissal of the rest, when he was startled by the fall of a twisted piece of paper on his slate.

He looked around to learn its starting point, when he observed Tom Wagstaff, who was seated on the other side of the room, peeping over the top of his book at him. Tom gave a wink which said plainly enough that it was he who had flipped the message so dexterously across the intervening space.

Jim next glanced at the teacher, who was busy with a small girl that had gone to his desk for help in her lessons. The coast being clear, so to speak, he unfolded the paper and read:

"Meat Bill Waylett and me after school at the cross roads, for the bizness is of the utmoast importants dont fale to be there for the iurn is hot and we must strike be4 it gits cool.

Tom."

The meaning of this note, despite its Völapuk construction, was clear, and Jim felt that he must be on hand at all hazards.

So the urchin applied himself with renewed vigor to his task, and, mastering it, found himself among the happy majority that were allowed to leave school at the hour of dismissal. A complication, however, arose from the fact that the writer of the note was one of those who failed with his lesson, and was obliged to stay with a half-dozen others until he recited it correctly.

Thus it happened that Jim McGovern and Billy Waylett, after sauntering to the crossroads, which had been named as the rendezvous, and waiting until the rest of the pupils appeared, found themselves without their leader.

But they were not compelled to wait long, when the lad, who was older than they, was seen hurrying along the highway, eager to meet and explain to them the momentous business that had led him to call this special meeting.

"Fellers," said he, as he came panting up, "let's climb over the fence and go among the trees."

"What for?" asked Billy Waylett.

"It won't do for anybody to hear us."

"Well, they won't hear us," observed Jim McGovern, "if we stay here, for we can see any one a half mile off."

"But they might sneak up when we wasn't watching," insisted the ringleader, who proceeded to scale the fence in the approved style of boyhood, the others following him.

Tom led the way for some distance among the trees, and then, when he came to a halt, peered among the branches overhead, and between and behind the trunks, to make sure no cowens were in the neighborhood.

Finally, everything was found to be as he wished, and he broke the important tidings in guarded undertones.

"I say, boys, are you both going to stick?"

"You bet we are," replied Billy, while Jim nodded his head several times to give emphasis to his answer.

"Well, don't you think the time has come to strike?"

"I've been thinking so for two--three weeks," said Billy.

"What I asked you two to meet me here for was to tell you that I've made up my mind we must make a move. Old Mr. Stearns, our teacher, is getting meaner every day; he gives us harder lessons than ever, and this afternoon he piled it on so heavy I had to stay after you fellers left. If Sam Bascomb hadn't sot behind me, and whispered two or three of them words, I would have been stuck there yet."

"He come mighty nigh catching me, too," observed Jim McGovern.

"You know we've made up our minds to go West to shoot Injuns, and the time has come to go."

The sparkle of the other boys' eyes and the flush upon their ruddy faces showed the pleasure which this announcement caused. The bliss of going West to reduce the population of our aborigines had been in their dreams for

months, and they were impatient with their chosen leader that he had deferred the delight so long. They were happy to learn at last that the delay was at an end.

"Now I want to know how you fellers have made out," said Tom, with an inquiring look from one to the other.

"I guess you'll find we've done purty well," said Jim; "anyways I know *I* have; I stole my sister's gold watch the other night and sold it to a peddler for ten dollars."

"What did you do with the ten dollars?"

"I bought a revolver and a lot of cartridges. Oh! I tell you I'm primed and ready, and I'm in favor of not leaving a single Injun in the West!"

"Them's my idees," chimed Billy Waylett.

"Well, how have *you* made out, Billy?"

"I got hold of father's watch, day before yesterday, but he caught me when I was sneaking out of the house and wanted to know what I was up to. I told him I thought it needed cleaning and was going to take it down to the jeweler's to have it 'tended to."

"Well, what then?"

Billy sighed as he said, meekly:

"Father said he guessed I was the one that needed 'tending to, and he caught me by the nape of the neck, and, boys, was you ever whipped with a skate strap?"

His friends shook their heads as an intimation that they had never been through that experience.

"Well, I hope you never will; but, say," he added, brightening up, "mother has a way of leaving her pocket-book layin' round that's awful mean, 'cause it sets a fellow to wishing for it. Pop makes her an allowance of one hundred dollars a month to run things, and last night I scooped twenty dollars out of her pocket-book, when it laid on the bureau in her room."

"Did she find it out?" asked Tom Wagstaff.

"Didn't she? Well, you had better believe she did, and she raised Cain, but I fixed things."

"How?" asked his companions, deeply interested.

"I told her I seen Kate, our hired girl, coming out of the room on tip-toe, just after dark. Then mother went for Kate, and she cried and said she wouldn't do a thing like that to save her from starving. It didn't do no good, for mother bounced her."

No thought of the burning injustice done an honest servant entered the thought of any one of the three boys. They chuckled and laughed, and agreed that the trick was one of the brightest of the kind they had ever known. Could the other two have done as well, the party would have been on their Westward jaunt at that moment.

"I've sometimes thought," said Tom Wagstaff, "that the old folks must have a 'spicion of what's going on, for they watch me so close that I haven't had a chance to steal a dollar, and you know it will never do to start without plenty of money; but I've a plan that'll fetch 'em," he added, with a meaning shake of his head.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you in a minute; you see I've got everything down fine, and I've made some changes in our plans."

His companions listened closely.

"You know that when we got through reading that splendid book, 'Roaring Ralph, the Cyclone of the Rockies,' we made up our minds that we must have two revolvers and a Winchester repeating rifle apiece before we started?"

The others nodded, to signify that they remembered the understanding.

"I was talking with a tramp the other day, who told me that he spends each winter among the Rocky Mountains killing Injins, and it's the biggest kind of fun. He says he steals up to a camp where there's 'bout fifty or a hundred of 'em, and makes a noise like a grizzly bear. That scares 'em so they all jump up and run for the woods. He takes after them and chases 'em till they climb the trees. Then, when they are all trying to hide among the limbs, beggin' for their lives, he begins. He takes his place in the middle, and keeps popping away until he has dropped 'em all. He says he has to stop sometimes to laugh at the way they come tumbling down, a good many of 'em falling on their heads. One time he treed forty-seven of 'em where the ground was soft and swampy. Twelve of the bravest Injin warriors turned over in falling through the limbs and struck on their scalps. The ground bein' soft, they sunk down over their shoulders, and stayed there wrong-side up. He said he almost died a-laughing, to see their legs sticking up in air, and they kicking like the

mischievous. When he got through there was twelve Injins with their legs out of the ground and their heads below. He said it looked as though some one had been planting Injins and they was sproutin' up mighty lively. He tried to pull 'em out, so as to get their scalps, but they was stuck fast and he had to give it up."

"And didn't he get their scalps?" asked Jimmy McGovern.

"No; it almost broke his heart to leave 'em, but he had to, for there was some other Injins to look after. Well, this tramp told me that all we needed was a revolver apiece."

"Oh! pshaw!" exclaimed Billy, "we can't get along without rifles of the repeating kind."

"Of course not, but we must wait till we arrive out West before we buy 'em. If each of us has a gun on our shoulder we're liable to be stopped by the officers."

"Well, if the officers git too sassy," suggested Billy, "why we'll drop *them* in their tracks and run."

"That might do if there wasn't so many of 'em. We don't want to bother with them, for we're goin' for Injins, and now and then a grizzly bear."

"I'm willing to do what you think is best; but who is this tramp that told you so much?"

"He said he was called Snakeroot Sam, because he rooted so hard for rattlesnakes. He tells me what we want is plenty of money, and it was our duty to steal everything we can from our parents and keep it till we get out West, where we can buy our Winchesters. If the people charge too much or act sassy like we can plug them and take the guns away from 'em."

This scheme struck the listeners favorably, and they smiled, nodded their heads, and fairly smacked their lips at the prospect of the glorious sport awaiting them.

"Snakeroot Sam is a mighty clever feller, and he says he will help us all he can. When we get enough money we are to let him know, and he will take charge of us. That will be lucky, for he can be our guide. He isn't very clean-looking," added Tom, with a vivid recollection of the frowsy appearance of the individual; "but he tells me that after we cross the Mississippi it's very dangerous to have our clothing washed, 'cause there's something in the water that don't agree with the people. That's the reason why he has his washed only once a year, and then he says he almost catches his death of cold."

"Gracious!" said Billy, "if he knows so much about the West, we must have him for our guide. Injin slayers always have to have a guide and we'll hire him."

"That's my idee exactly. I spoke to Sam about it, and he said he would like to oblige us very much, though he had two or three contracts on hand which was worth a good many thousand dollars to him, but he liked my looks so well he'd throw them up and join us."

"How much will he charge?"

"I didn't ask him that; but he's a fair man and will make it all right. What I don't want you to forget, boys, is that we've got to raise a good deal more money."

"What a pity I didn't steal all there was in mother's pocket-book when I had such a good chance," remarked Billy, with a sigh; "if I get another chance I'll fix it."

"I think I can slip into father's room tonight after he's asleep," added Jim McGovern, "and if I do, I'll clean him out."

"You fellers have a better chance than me," said Tom, "but I'm going to beat you both and have twice as much money as you."

This was stirring news to the other boys, who were seated on the ground at the feet, as may be said, of their champion. They asked him in awed voices to explain.

"You've got a pistol, Jimmy?"

"Yes; a regular five-chambered one, and I've got a lot of cartridges, too."

"There's going to be a concert at the Hall to-night," added Tom, peering behind, around, and among the trees again to make sure no one else heard his words, "and father and mother are going. They will take all the children, too, except me."

"How's that?"

"He says I was such a bad boy yesterday that he means to punish me by making me stay at home, but that's just what I want him to do, and if he feels sort of sorry and lets up, I'll pretend I'm sick so he will leave me behind. I tell you, fellows, Providence is on our side and we're going to win."

His companions shared the faith of the young scamp, who now proceeded to unfold his astounding scheme.

CHAPTER II--HOW THE SCHEME WORKED

"The folks will leave the house," said Tom Wagstaff, "about half-past seven, and there will be no one home but me and Maggie, the girl. I'll be up in my room and Maggie down-stairs. When I lean out the window and wave my hand I want you, Jim, to fire two or three charges out of your revolver through the winders of the dining-room."

"What for?" asked the startled Jim.

"Wait, and I'll tell you; the noise of the pistol and the breaking of the glass will scare Maggie half to death: she will run out of the house, and you and Billy must then slip inside, hurry up-stairs, tie me to the bed-post, and put a gag in my mouth. I'll have all the money and jewelry ready in a handkerchief, and you can scoot with it. Maggie will run down to the Hall and tell father and mother, and they'll hurry home and be so scared they won't know what to do. They'll untie me, and I'll pretend I'm almost dead, and they'll call in the police, and when I come to, I'll have a story to tell about robbers with masks on their faces, and all that sort of thing, and they'll hunt for 'em, and never smell a mouse. What do you think of it, fellers?"

It was a scheme which, in its vicious cunning, was worthy of older scamps than these three young school-boys; but their minds were poisoned by pernicious reading, and they eagerly entered into its spirit. Everything promised success, and Tom, the originator of the plan, found his companions as eager as himself to lend a hand in carrying it out.

It seemed as if fate had arranged to help the boys. When the three climbed over the fence again into the highway, and separated to their homes, Tom, in order that there should be no miscarriage of the programme, took pains to be particularly ugly and impudent to his parents. His kind-hearted father was disposed at first to recall the threat made in the morning that his son should not go with the rest to the concert in the Town Hall, but he was so irritated by the behavior of the lad that he not only carried out his threat, but was on the point of chastising him before leaving home.

It followed, therefore, that when eight o'clock came, the condition of the household was just what Tom prophesied and wished. Maggie, the hired girl, was busy at her duties below-stairs, when he stole softly to the upper story and began his work of ransacking the bureau-drawers. He found considerable jewelry belonging to his mother and sisters, besides over seventy dollars in money which his father had left within easy reach.

All this was gathered into a handkerchief, which was securely tied and placed on a chair beside the window, where the gas was burning at full head. Then, everything being in readiness, he quietly raised the window and looked out.

The night was dark, without any moon, and even his keen eyes could detect nothing among the dense trees which surrounded the fine residence of his father. But, when he whistled, there was a reply from under the branches which he recognized as coming from his allies, who were on the lookout.

Tom waved his hand, lowered the sash, and stepped back from the window.

Maggie was singing below-stairs and, with that exception, everything was still. His heart beat fast as he knew that the opening of the drama, as it may be called, was at hand.

Suddenly the sharp report of a pistol rang out on the night, followed by a second and third shot, mingled with the crash and jingle of glass. Jim McGovern was doing his part with unquestioned promptness.

The singing of Maggie ceased as if she were paralyzed by the shock; but with the third report her scream pierced every nook in the building, and she was heard running to and fro as if in blind terror. She would have dashed up-stairs to escape, but a noise on the rear porch caused her to believe the burglars were about entering the building, and she was certain to be killed if she remained.

Through the front door she went in the darkness, her screams stilled through fear that the dreaded beings would be guided by them; and, recovering her senses somewhat when she reached the street, she hurried in the direction of the Town Hall to acquaint Mr. and Mrs. Wagstaff with the awful goings-on at home.

Billy Waylett and Jim McGovern were on the watch, and the moment she vanished they entered through the rear door, which remained unlocked, and hastened up-stairs to the room where the gas was burning and from which Tom had signalled to them.

"Quick, fellers!" he said, as they burst into the apartment, "father will soon be back."

"Where's the rope?" asked Jim.

"There on the chair."

"What's that handkerchief for?"

"The money and jewelry is in it; tie me first and then hurry out with that, and take good care of it till to-morrow, when we will fix things; hurry up!"

Billy had the rope in hand, and both boys set to work to bind the young rogue to the bed-post. Since the victim gave all the aid he could, the task was completed with less delay and difficulty than would have been supposed.

This was due also to the preparations which Tom had made for the business. A strong bed-cord, cut in several pieces, was at hand. His wrists were bound together behind his back; then his ankles were joined, and finally the longest piece of rope was wound several times around his waist and made fast to the bed-post. This rendered him helpless, and he could not have released himself had his life been at stake.

But the shrewd boy knew that something more must be done. Though tied securely, his mouth was at command, and it was to be expected that he would use his voice with the fullest power the moment his captors left him alone.

But with all the cunning displayed by Tom, and with all his perfect preparations in other respects, and after having referred to the necessity of the gagging operation, he had forgotten to be ready for it.

"What shall we put in your mouth?" asked Jim, pausing and looking round after the binding was finished.

"Golly! I forgot all about that," was the reply.

Billy darted to the bureau and caught up a large hair-brush.

"How'll this do?" he asked, holding it up to view.

"It won't do at all," was the disgusted reply; "it's too big for my mouth."

"I don't know 'bout that; you've got the biggest mouth in school."

"We'll take a sheet off the bed," said Jim, beginning to tug at the coverlets.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Tom; "do you think you can cram a whole sheet in my mouth?"

"Why not?"

"Cause you can't; that's the reason."

"I have it," exclaimed Billy, running to the corner of the room and catching up a porcelain cuspidor; "this will just fit. Open your mouth, Tom, and give me a chance."

But at this juncture, when the perplexity threatened to upset everything, Billy Waylett solved the difficulty by whisking out his linen pocket-handkerchief.

"Now you're talking," remarked the pleased Tom; "why didn't we think of that before?"

It was curious, indeed, that they did not, and it was curious, too, in view of the cunning shown in other directions, that all three forgot a precaution which ought to have occurred to them.

A handkerchief was just the thing to be used to seal the mouth of the victim, but it should have come from the pocket of Tom Wagstaff instead of from Billy Waylett's.

Perhaps had the boys felt that abundance of time was at command, they would have thought of this necessity; but they were well aware that Maggie, the servant, was making good speed to the Town Hall, and that Mr. Wagstaff would not let the grass grow under his feet on his way home. Besides, too, the screams of the girl were likely to bring others to the spot before the coming of the owner of the house. The boys, therefore, had not a minute to throw away, and they did not idle their time.

The twisted handkerchief was pushed between the open jaws of the victim, like the bit in a horse's mouth, and then knotted and tied behind his head. Billy, who took charge of this little job, was not over-gentle, and more than once the victim protested. Little heed, however, was paid to him, and his words were but feeble mumblings when sifted through the meshes of the handkerchief.

"There! I guess that'll do," said Billy, stepping back and surveying his work; "how do you feel, Tommy?"

The latter nodded his head, mumbled, and tried to speak. He was urging them to leave, but his words were unintelligible.

Meanwhile Jim had picked up the other handkerchief, tied at the corners, and was surprised to find how heavy it was. It contained much valuable property.

The boys were reminded of their remissness by the sound of voices on the outside. Neighbors were at hand.

"We're caught; it's too late; what shall we do?" gasped Jim, dropping the handkerchief with its precious contents.

"They will hang us for bigamy," replied Billy, turning pale and trembling in every limb.

Tom Wagstaff tried hard to utter a few words, and was struggling to free himself, but succeeded in neither attempt.

"Come on!" whispered Jim, catching up his load again; "they haven't got in, and we may have a chance."

He whisked through the open door, and scurried down the carpeted stairs, with Billy so close on his heels that both narrowly escaped bumping and rolling to the bottom.

The voices were louder, and it looked as if the youngsters were caught.

And such would have been the case, but for the timidity of the parties out-doors. They had been drawn thither by the out-cries of the servant, and were convinced that some fearful tragedy was going on, or had been completed within the dwelling.

These people were unarmed, and it was only natural that they should shrink from entering where several desperate men were supposed to be at bay. They consulted with each other and decided to await the arrival of re-enforcements.

This was the golden opportunity of the young scamps. The rear door was ajar and they noiselessly drew it inward far enough to allow them to pass through.

Before venturing forth they peeped out in the darkness. They could see nothing, though, for that matter, there might have been a dozen persons within a few feet without being visible; but the room in which the lads stood was also without a light, so that the advantage was equal.

The sound of the voices showed that the new arrivals were at the front, and the way was open for the flight of the amateur burglars, who still hesitated, afraid that men were lying in wait to nab them.

More than likely they would have tarried too long, but for a movement on the part of the newcomers. They were increasing so fast that they became courageous, and one of them pushed open the front door.

The creaking of its hinges and the tramping in the adjoining room spurred Jim and Billy, who hesitated no longer. Through the door they stole on tip-toe, and a few steps took them across the porch to the soft ground, where the soft earth gave back no sound. The trees, too, seemed to spread their protecting branches over them, and inspired them with such courage that, after hurrying a few rods, they came to a stop and looked back and listened.

"By George! that was the luckiest thing that ever happened to us!" whispered Jim McGovern, with a sigh of relief.

"That's so," assented his companion; "I thought we was goners sure, and we come mighty nigh it."

"I wonder whether that gag is too tight in Tom's mouth?"

"No, of course not; can't he breathe through his nose?"

"But mebbe he has a cold."

"That won't make any difference, for he knows how to breathe through his ears; Tom's too smart to die yet. Besides, if he *is* dead, it's too late for us to help him; them folks are upstairs by this time, and they'll get the handkerchief out of his mouth in a jiffy, unless, mebbe, he has swallowed it."

"I say, Billy," said Jim, "this thing in my hand weighs more than a ton!"

"It must have lots of gold in it; shall I help you carry it?"

"No, I can manage it; but what shall we do with the thing? It won't do to take it home, for our folks might find it."

"We'll bury it under that stump back of our barn."

"Is that a good place?"

"There aint any better in the world, for nobody wouldn't think of looking there for it."

"I seen our dog Bowser pawing under the stump the other day."

"But he wasn't pawing for money; we'll hide it there till we're ready to use it."

The two moved off, when they heard another cry from the house behind them. They recognized it as the voice of Mrs. Wagstaff, who had arrived on the scene with her husband, and was probably overcome at sight of the woful plight of her boy.

CHAPTER III--A STARTLING OCCURRENCE

Mr. Wagstaff, on receiving word at the Town Hall from the janitor who brought the message of the terrified servant to him, forgot, in his excitement, to tell his wife of the fearful news, and rushed out-of-doors without a word.

Mrs. Wagstaff knew it must be something awful that had called him away in that style, and she lost no time in following, while the children scrambled after them at varying distances.

The husband entered the door through which several of the neighbors had timidly passed, only a few paces ahead of his wife, who was upstairs almost as soon as he.

"Oh! my dear Tommy," she wailed, as she caught sight of the silent figure fastened at the foot of the bed; "have they killed you?"

The sight was enough to startle any parent. The father had just jerked the handkerchief loose and flung it to the floor, and the lad's head was drooping over on one shoulder, his eyes half-closed, and his tongue protruding. The parent caught up a pitcher of water and dashed it in his face, while the mother frantically strove to unfasten the cruel thongs at the wrists and ankles.

The unexpected shock of the water startled Tommy into gasping and opening his eyes, but his look was dazed and aimless. His father whipped out his pocket-knife and quickly cut the thongs. The released boy would have fallen had not both parents seized and laid him on the bed, where he moaned as if suffering greatly.

"Send for the doctor at once," said the mother.

"And call in the police," added the father; "a dastardly outrage has been committed; it may prove murder."

By this time the room was filled with horrified and sympathizing neighbors. The solicitude of the parents for their child caused them to pay no heed to the visitors until the father, seeing a friend at his elbow, begged him to clear the house of intruders, and to admit no one except the physician or an officer of the law.

It took but a few minutes to comply with this request, and the parents were left to give undivided attention to their suffering child, who continued to moan and roll his eyes as if he were at his last gasp.

The father was anxious, silent, and watchful; the mother demonstrative and weeping. She rubbed her boy's hands, chafed his limbs, gazing lovingly the meanwhile in his face, and begging him to speak to her. Maggie, the servant, had regained her senses, now that she was sure she was alive and the precious heir had not been killed. She took upon herself to fasten the doors and keep out intruders, finding time to make a search up-stairs, which needed to be extended only a few minutes to learn that an extensive robbery had been committed.

"Of course," remarked Mr. Wagstaff, when the amount of his loss, as well as that of his wife, was reported to him, "I knew what had been done the moment I saw my poor boy."

"Don't tell me," said the mother, waving the servant away, "I don't care if they have taken everything in the house, so long as my darling Tommy lives."

Her heart was kept in a state of torture by the alarming symptoms of her heir. At times he seemed about to revive, a look of intelligence coming into his eyes, but, after several gasping efforts to speak, he sank back on his pillow and gave it up as a failure.

By and by, in the midst of the trying scene, the physician arrived and took charge of the patient. He was a wise old gentleman of wide experience, and his cheerful words did much to awaken hope in the parents, who hung on his words and watched his manner.

It required but a few minutes for him to make known that their child was not seriously hurt. During his examination he gleaned the particulars of the outrage, and succeeded in getting Tommy into a sitting posture. Then he expressed the belief that if the boy's senses did not come to him very soon he would have to bore a hole through his crown with a large auger.

This astounding declaration was meant for the benefit of Tommy alone, a sly wink at the parents preventing them from taking alarm. It was noteworthy that the boy began to pick up at once, and in the course of a few minutes was entirely himself.

When the chief of police arrived the urchin was able to talk with something of his usual facility, and imparted to his awed listeners his account of the daring outrage and crime.

He said he did not feel very well after his folks left for the concert, and he went up-stairs to lie down on his parents' bed. He thought it strange that the gas was lit, though it was turned down, but he supposed it had been done by Maggie.

Just as he lay down he fancied he heard a man moving softly about the room. He rose from the bed and was about to call out, when he became sure that there were two persons near him. Before he could give the alarm he was seized and told that if he made any noise he would be instantly killed.

Still the brave boy tried to shout, when he was gagged, bound, and tied to the bed-post, where he remained while the robbery went on around him.

The doctor having pronounced Tommy out of danger, his parents became more composed, and listened quietly to the questioning of the chief of police, who was one of the shrewdest members of his profession.

He listened gravely until the questions of the others were finished, when he asked Tommy to describe the appearance of the criminals so far as he could. The lad did so quite glibly. Both of the intruders were masked, wore soft, slouch hats, long dark coats buttoned to their chins, had gruff voices, and one of them took a dreadful-looking revolver from his side pocket, and seemed to be on the point of discharging several of the chambers at the captive.

Chief Hungerford asked the latter about the shots that had broken the glass down-stairs, and given the servant such a fright. At first Tommy declared he did not hear them, but upon being questioned further, recalled that he did hear something of the kind just after he was bound.

"Is this the handkerchief with which he was gagged?" asked the officer, picking up the article from the floor.

"Yes, that's it," replied the father, who had snatched it from the head of his son the instant he reached the room.

The chief continued talking without looking further at the linen, but when the attention of the couple was diverted he slipped it into his pocket. Then he asked liberty to make an examination of the house. Permission was cheerfully accorded, and he spent a half-hour in going through the lower story in his own peculiar but thorough manner.

At the end of that period he came back to the room where the parents, brothers, and sisters were coddling poor Tommy, who was muffled up in a rocking-chair, sipping lemonade, sucking oranges, and nibbling the choicest candy. Now and then he would start convulsively and beg them to take away those bad men, and not let them hurt him. Then, when he was reassured by the kind words of the loving ones around him, he complained of his throat, and found it helpful to swallow more lemonade and take an additional suck or two at one of the oranges pressed upon him.

Chief Hungerford stood in the door of the room, hat in hand, and looked fixedly at the lad for a minute or two before speaking. Even then it was only in answer to the question of Mr. Wagstaff.

"What have you found?"

"Nothing special, sir; there have been so many people in the house tramping back and forth, that they have destroyed what clues we might have discovered. Then, too, the job was so easy that there was no need of leaving any traces."

"How was that?"

"Why the doors were unlocked, so that they had only to open and enter without forcing a window or fastening anywhere. After they got inside they found you were kind enough to leave keys wherever they were needed, and consequently no violence was required up-stairs."

"But why did they fire those shots through the window down-stairs?"

"That was to frighten away the servant."

"It seems a strange proceeding when the reports were sure to be heard and bring people here, while the servant herself was certain to raise the alarm. They might have bound and scared her into quiescence."

The chief of police had thought of all this before, and looked upon it as one of the peculiar features of the business; but he smiled, and said, in his off-hand fashion:

"It may strike us both as a little odd, but the best proof of the wisdom of what the scamps did is the fact that they got off with the plunder and have not left the first clew behind. Well, good-evening all; I will report as soon as I pick up anything worth telling."

And courteously saluting the family he descended the stairs and passed out of the door. Before doing so he questioned the servant on what seemed unimportant points. Finally he entered the street and was obliged to answer the innumerable questions that were asked him at every turn. He had found it necessary to station a couple of his men on the premises to keep away the curious people, who persisted in crowding forward through the grounds and even into the house itself.

The rumors on the streets did not astonish him, even though they were to the effect that Tommy (everybody called him "Tommy" since his mishap) had been strangled to death, his last breath leaving him just as he was caught in his mother's arms, and that Maggie the servant had been attacked and badly wounded, but escaped by leaping from the second story window and running to the Town Hall, where the family were attending a concert.

When the chief entered his private room he drew the handkerchief from his pocket, spread it out on his desk under a strong gaslight and carefully examined it.

He had little hope of finding anything worth knowing, but he was too wise to neglect the least step. He carefully went over the somewhat soiled piece of linen and smiled to himself when he observed that a name was written in the corner in indelible ink.

"Burglars aint apt to carry handkerchiefs around even with their initials written on them, but one of these gentry has been kind enough to give us his whole name. It is written so legibly, too, that I can read it without my glasses. Ah, '*William Waylett!*' there it is as plain as print.

"It strikes me," continued the chief, following the train of thought, "that I've heard that name before. Jim Waylett was my classmate in college, and he has three daughters and one boy. The name of the youngster is William, generally called Billy. That chap is the owner of this handkerchief as sure as a gun."

By this time, as the reader will perceive, the sagacious officer was not only on the right trail, but advancing rapidly to the correct conclusion. He had not heard all of Tommy Wagstaff's story before he began to grow suspicious. His experience enabled him to detect more than one inconsistency despite the skill of the tremendous falsifier who built up the structure.

Investigation and further questioning confirmed this suspicion until, when he left the house, all doubt was gone. He knew that no man had visited the Wagstaff home that night or taken any part in the indignities to which Master Tommy was subjected.

But it was equally clear that the young rogue had had partners in his shameless trick, and the chief meant to learn who they were.

He was confident that he could find them out from Tommy himself, whom he could handle in such a way as to force a confession, but while the parents, especially the mother, were in such a state of excitement, they would be indignant at the first hint of the boy's trickery, and would defeat what advantage he might gain if left alone with him.

"They will come to it in the course of a few days," reflected the officer, who had seen similar scenes before, "and it won't do any harm to wait until then. I will get a chance at the boy before long, and, if I don't force it out of him, then I'll resign my office and take to the woods."

The chief was desirous also of sparing the feelings of the parents of the boy, whom he liked. They would feel much worse if compelled to admit the truth after first refusing to listen to his suggestion. Then, too, he had another boy to work upon. Billy Waylett must know something of the affair. At any rate, he could tell how it was his handkerchief came to be used to gag one of his playmates, and *that* little piece of information was likely to give him just the clew that was needed.

"I'll wait until things get cool," concluded the chief, who happened to have other matters pressing upon his attention just then.

Accordingly he gave his whole energies to the business which took him out of Ashton for a part of two days. When he returned it was with the resolve to take hold of the matter in earnest, but to his dismay, when he came to make inquiry, he was told that Tommy Wagstaff, Jimmy McGovern, and Billy Waylett had disappeared.

CHAPTER IV--THE RUNAWAYS

That fate which had seemed to favor the three audacious youngsters did not desert them when the critical point in their enterprise arrived.

The chief of police was wise in restraining any hint of what was in his mind to the parents of Tommy Wagstaff. It would have been repelled with wrath and made them enemies--all the more bitter, perhaps, when it should appear that the wise officer was right.

The youngster, having suffered so cruelly, received every compensation his friends could give him. His father reproved himself for making him stay home from the concert. Had he taken him with him, the outrage never could have occurred.

The mother heaped favors upon her darling Tommy, who might have luxuriated for weeks on the general sympathy felt for him. He was visited by several newspaper reporters, who took down the thrilling account from his own lips. The chief trouble in these cases was the wide variance in the versions given by the lad. In some instances he insisted there were three burglars, in others only two, while to one young man in spectacles, he solemnly averred that there were seven by actual count, and that they were all armed with tomahawks and scalping knives. These wild statements were attributed to the lad's nervousness instead of to the real cause.

But on the next afternoon, or rather evening, Tommy did not make his appearance at supper. The mother was greatly frightened and believed the robbers had returned to revenge themselves upon her darling for telling the truth about them.

Before the evening was late, Mr. Wagstaff learned that Tommy, accompanied by Billy Waylett and Jimmy McGovern, had been seen hurrying in the direction of the railway station. Inquiry there revealed the fact all three had bought tickets for New York.

About this time a dim suspicion took shape in the mind of Mr. Wagstaff. He gave no hint to his wife, but he telegraphed the authorities in the metropolis to look out for three boys, and to arrest them at once and communicate with their parents, Messrs. Waylett and McGovern having joined in the request.

New York was so near Ashton that the runaways arrived there more than an hour before the telegram was sent, otherwise they would have been returned to their homes the same evening.

Their fathers next held a conference, and on the following day applied to the chief of police for counsel. That gentleman listened grimly to them, and then quietly said that the robbery of Mr. Wagstaff's home had been planned and carried out by the three lads without help from any one else. They were shocked, but when he showed Billy Waylett's handkerchief, which had been used to check the utterance of Tommy, and pointed out the numerous tell-tale slips made by the boys, especially the shooting through the windows, they were convinced, and became eager to capture them at the earliest possible moment, each parent declaring that the instant his son was brought within reach, he would give him a trouncing that he would remember to his dying day.

It was arranged that Chief Hungerford should undertake to hunt them up, and he readily agreed to do so, for the gentlemen were warm friends of his, for whom he was ready to make any reasonable sacrifice.

And now that a pursuer is on the trail of the runaways, let us see how they got along.

The indulgence shown Tommy by his parents gave him just the opportunity he wanted. He was able to hold several meetings with his intended partners, without any one suspecting what was going on, and the arrangements were made for starting for New York on the afternoon following the supposed robbery.

In one respect, the lads showed a wisdom beyond their years. Knowing that prompt search would be made for them, and that they were likely to be looked upon with suspicion, they decided to leave the stolen jewelry where it had been placed beneath the old stump. If worse came to worse, they could return and draw upon it, but if they should try to sell the valuables in New York, they would be arrested on suspicion.

So they wisely left the jewelry behind, and took with them only a single gold watch, which Tommy wore, since it was the property of his father. They found that they had fully a hundred dollars in money, which, as nearly as they could learn, would carry them most of the distance they wished to go, when such bright chaps would have no trouble in hitting upon the means for raising the wind.

Since they expected to meet Snakeroot Sam, it was intended to send him back to Ashton, to sell the plunder for them, inasmuch as he could readily do it without danger, and was so honest that he would turn over every penny of the

proceeds to them.

Reaching New York ahead of the telegram, they were too wise to linger around the large station at Forty-second Street. More than likely, all three of their irate fathers would be there in the course of an hour or two, and it was, therefore, no place for them.

Since it was growing dark, they decided to put up at some obscure hotel, under assumed names, and make an early start for the West. The wisdom shown by the lads was astonishing--the oldest of whom had not seen fourteen years. They had talked and discussed the venture for months, and stored their minds with all the information obtainable. Consequently, when they sauntered out on the street, and, after some inquiries, reached Broadway, they attracted no special attention. They were well dressed, and the additional revolvers which they speedily bought were carried out of sight, so that there was no noticeable difference between them and the hundreds of other boys who may be met on any day in the great metropolis of our country.

Billy Waylett, being the youngest, needed some coaching, but he was tractable, and the lads were fortunate enough to escape the sharks that are always waiting in the large cities for just such prey as they would have proved.

The only thing that worried Tommy Wagstaff was the fact that he did not know how to find Snakeroot Sam. That worthy had been told of the intended start for the West, but, of course, the leader could not give him the precise date of their departure. It was known, however, that he spent a good deal of his time in New York city, and the leader of the party instructed his companions to keep a sharp lookout for him. They did so, but though they pointed out several persons who answered his description, none of them proved to be the individual they were so anxious to meet, and who, doubtless, would have blessed his lucky stars could he have met them.

Tommy Wagstaff was satisfied that the crisis in their enterprise would come when they reached the ferry to buy their railway tickets. Officers would be on the watch for them, and if the three should present themselves at the office and pay their fare to Chicago or some other Western point, they were quite sure to be stopped and compelled to give an account of themselves.

Accordingly, he arranged the matter with the shrewdness he had shown from the first. They separated at the foot of Cortlandt Street and made their way into the railway office, as though they were strangers to each other. Billy had enough money to buy a ticket to New Brunswick, and Jimmy to procure one to Trenton, while Tommy, who had taken charge of the entire funds, paid his fare to Philadelphia. Then they passed through the narrow gateway upon the ferryboat.

The three were alarmed by the sight of a blue-coated policeman, standing at the broad entrance to the ferry, and who scrutinized them sharply as they joined the swarm hurrying upon the boat. The officer followed Billy with his eyes, and seemed on the point of starting after him. The youngster's heart was in his throat, and he wished that something would blow up and scatter everybody so far apart that no policeman could see him.

So guarded were the boys they did not speak to each other while crossing the ferry, indulging in only an occasional sly glance, as they stepped off the boat and passed up the slip.

Here they were startled again, for the big policeman near the passageway to the trains, after one keen look at Billy, asked him where he was going.

"To New Brunswick," was the slightly tremulous reply.

"Let me see your ticket," was the gruff command.

Billy fished out the pasteboard and showed it to the terrible fellow, who was not yet satisfied.

"What are you doing in New York?"

"I aint in New York; I am in Jersey City."

The officer smiled at the manner in which he had tripped, and asked:

"Where are the other two boys that came with you?"

Billy came nigh breaking down. He saw Tommy and Jimmy watching him from a little way, and his naturally quick wit came to his relief.

"What two boys are you talking 'bout? Don't you see there's nobody with me, and if you keep me much longer, I'll miss the train, and father will be mad, 'cause he expects me to be home as soon as I can get there."

The urchin made as if to move forward, and the officer, satisfied he was not the one for whom he was looking, allowed him to pass on.

After entering the car, Tommy Wagstaff saw no risk in their companionship. Since the train was not crowded, he and Billy sat together, while Jimmy McGovern placed himself on the seat in front, where no one shared it with him.

There was a bustle and novelty about this business which kept the boys in such a constant state of excitement that they had felt nothing as yet like homesickness. In fact, they were eager to get forward, and though there was much to see that was new and strange, they would have been glad could the cars have traveled with double the speed.

"The way I figure it out," said the leader, feeling now that he could talk freely, since they were well under way, "is that we shall reach Philadelphia before noon. Jiminy! but that is traveling fast; shall we get off there and stay over till to-morrow?"

"What would we do that for?" demanded young McGovern.

"There's so much to see that I didn't know but what you would like to stop and look around."

"Not much," replied Jimmy, with a disgusted shake of his head; "we can't get out West soon enough to suit me; I feel hungry for Injins and grizzly bears: how is it with you, Billy?"

"That's me, clear through; you know we've got to get a Winchester apiece, and then we'll be ready to begin popping over Injins; that'll be more fun than anything else in the world, and what do I care for all the cities and strange things that's between us and the West?"

Tommy laughed, for he was pleased.

"That's just the way I feel, but I didn't know whether you two was right up to the handle yet; I'm glad you are; it proves that we are bound to win, like real brave American boys."

All three smiled approvingly on each other, and, glancing out of the window, wished the cars would run at the rate of two miles a minute, for the rest of the distance.

The conductor came through, punched the tickets, and took up Billy's, because it entitled him to ride only to New Brunswick. He intended to slip off there and buy one to Philadelphia, while Jimmy would do the same at Trenton. If the Quaker City were reached without mishap, they would conclude that all danger of being stopped was over, and from that point would travel openly and without fear.

The little party chatted and discussed their plans, sometimes speaking so loud in their ardor that the gentleman sitting just across the aisle overhead their words and looked curiously at them more than once, over the top of his paper.

Just before reaching the long trestle-work which spans the Raritan, Billy said:

"We must be pretty near New Brunswick, Tom, and I guess you had better give me enough money to buy a ticket: how much will it be?"

"I don't know; I s'pose two or three dollars; you ought to travel on half fare, but it aint worth bothering about; we'll gather in all the funds we want in Chicago."

"It strikes me," remarked McGovern, "that we might as well divide up the money, so that if any one loses his share, we won't be in a bad fix."

"I guess that would be a good plan," replied Tommy, who reached in his trousers pocket for the roll of bills which he had placed there.

He started and turned pale the next moment, and hurriedly ran his hand in his other pocket. Then he sprang to his feet and frantically searched the pockets of his coat and vest.

"What's the matter?" asked Jimmy, with a sinking of the heart.

"The money is gone!" was the alarming answer.

"No; that can't be!" faintly exclaimed Billy; "it must be somewhere about you."

"I put the roll in *that*, pocket," replied Tommy, who kept up his search, through all the receptacles, again and again. Then he stooped down, and hunted under the seats with a nervous distress which was fully shared by his companions.

Finally he straightened up and said, despairingly:

"My pocket has been picked, and we haven't a dollar among us."

He spoke the truth.

CHAPTER V--THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR

Three more miserable lads could not be imagined than our young friends when the train stopped at the station in New Brunswick, and they knew that the total amount of their joint funds was less than a dollar.

No one spoke, but they sat pale, woebegone and staring helplessly at each other, undecided what to do.

The conductor, who was an alert official, said to Billy:

"This is where you get off; come, step lively."

The lad rose to his feet without a word, and started down the aisle for the door. His companions glanced at him, and, feeling that it would not do for them to separate, also rose by common impulse and followed him out on the platform, where they stood silent and wretched until the train left.

Jimmy McGovern was the first to speak, and it was with the deepest sigh he ever drew:

"Well, boys, what's to be done?"

"Let's go back home," said Billy, "and get the jewelry under the stump, sell that and start over again; I guess we'll know enough to take care of our money next time."

"But we haven't enough to pay our fare," remarked Tommy.

"We can walk to Jersey City; we've got a little money, and we'll sell a revolver there: that will take one of us to Ashton, and he can get the jewelry."

It was a most repellent course, and they spent a half-hour in discussing it; but it really seemed that nothing else was possible, and the proceeding was agreed upon.

Few words were spoken as they walked down the slope from the station, made their way to the bridge a short distance below the trestle-work, and walked across to the other side. Inquiry showed them that they had almost thirty miles to walk to Jersey City, and since the forenoon was well advanced, they could not expect to reach their destination before the morrow.

But it was the spring of the year, the weather was mild, and they concluded they could beg something to eat. If the farmers refused them permission to sleep in their houses, they could take refuge in some barn, after the manner of ordinary tramps.

But an unexpected series of adventures was before them.

After crossing the Raritan and walking a short distance, they turned into a stretch of woods, where they sat down to discuss further what ought to be done. With the elastic spirits of childhood, all had rallied somewhat from the extreme depression following the discovery of the loss of their funds. The leader was especially hopeful.

"I don't know but what it is best this happened," said he, "for we hadn't enough money to see us through, and one of us might have to come back after we got to Chicago, and that would have been bad."

"But we expected to get money there," said Jimmy.

"I don't believe it would be as easy as we thought; now I will leave you two in New York, after we reach there, go back to Ashton, get the jewelry and bring it with me. We can sell it for two or three thousand dollars, and we'll be fixed."

The others caught the infection of hope and rose to their feet, eager to reach the metropolis as soon as possible.

They were about to resume their journey, when they heard voices near them. Looking around, two frowzy men were observed walking slowly toward them. One was munching a sandwich, while the other had a short black pipe between his teeth.

The reader may not know that the woods, on the northern bank of the Raritan, is the spot where the numerous tramps of New Jersey have their general rendezvous. Several hundred of these nuisances are sometimes gathered there, and they are held in great dread by the neighbors, for they are lazy, thievish, and lawless, and have perpetrated so many outrages that more than one descent has been made upon their camp by the authorities, while the law-abiding citizens have been on the point, at times, of taking severe measure against them.

Unsuspecting of the fact, the boys had approached close to the camp of the tramps.

The two tousled specimens caught sight of the boys at the same moment that the latter discovered them. The one

munching a sandwich stopped, stared a second, and then, speaking as well as he could, with his mouth full of food, exclaimed:

"Well, I'll be shot if this doesn't beat the bugs!"

"Why, Snakeroot Sam!" called the delighted Tommy Wagstaff, "if this isn't the luckiest thing that could happen!"

"Where did you come from?" asked that worthy, swallowing what was in his mouth, and indulging in a grin which disclosed a double row of large black teeth. His companion pulled his pipe and looked on in silence.

"Why, didn't I tell you we was going to start for the West about this time?" asked the happy leader of the little party.

"So you did; I jotted it down in my notebook, but seein' as how you didn't give me the percise date, I couldn't be on hand to wish you good-bye; but what are you doin' *here*?"

"We've had bad luck," was the disconsolate reply; "we've been robbed of all our money."

"And are goin' to hoof it back?"

"That's what we'll have to do, but we mean to take a new start."

"How did this unfortinit misfortune come to overtake ye?"

Tommy gave the history of their mishap, the two tramps listening with much interest.

"This is my friend, Ragged Jim," said Sam, when the narrative was finished, "and he's true blue."

Ragged Jim nodded his head and grunted, without taking the black clay pipe from between his teeth, while Snakeroot Sam munched his sandwich at intervals.

"So you've no money with you?"

"Not a dollar," replied Tommy.

"How 'bout your shootin' irons?"

"They're all right; we've got a good revolver."

"Let me look at 'em; I'd like to be sure that they're the right kind to plug redskins with."

The boys promptly produced their weapons, and passed them over to Sam, who examined each in turn, and then handed a couple to his companion.

"I obsarve a watch-chain onto ye," continued Sam; "I hope you aint so dishonorable es to carry a chain without a watch at t'other end to sorter balance it."

"I've got my father's time-piece with me," replied Tommy, producing the fine chronometer, and passing it to the tramp, who extended his hand for it.

Sam turned it over in his hand with the same attentive interest he had shown in the case of the revolvers. The single weapon he had shoved in his hip-pocket. He held the timepiece to his ear, listened to its ticking, surveyed the face, and then deliberately slipped it into his trousers pocket, catching the chain in the hole through which he had previously run a ten-penny nail to give his garments the right fit.

"How does that look on me?" he asked, with a grin, of his friend.

"It fits you bootiful," replied Ragged Jim, "which the same is the case with these weapons and myself."

"Good-day, sonnies," said Snakeroot Sam, doffing his dilapidated hat with mock courtesy.

"But," said the dismayed Tommy, "that's my watch."

"Why, sonny, you shouldn't tell a story; that's wicked."

"But it *is* mine; I want it."

"Didn't you just tell me it was your father's?"

"Yes--but I want it."

"Give my lovin' respects to your governor, and tell him when I come his way I'll stop and pass it over to him."

With tears in his eyes, Tommy rushed forward as the tramp began moving off, and caught his arm.

"Sam, you must let me have that!"

"What! are you goin' to commit highway robbery?" he demanded, as if frightened: "do you want it bad?"

"Of course I do, and I mean to get it."

"All right."

Snakeroot Sam turned about, seized the boy by the nape of his coat, and delivered a kick which sent him several paces and caused him to fall on his face. Then he wheeled as if to serve Jimmy and Billy in the same manner, but they eluded him by running out of the woods to the highway. Ragged Jim stood laughing at the scene, and Sam made again for Tommy; but he had leaped to his feet and hurried after his companions.

"By-by," called Sam; "when you get that money call on me again and I'll take charge of it."

When the three came together in the road, each was crying. Tommy suffered from the pain of his ill-usage, while all were in despair. Neither could say a word to comfort the others, and they tramped wearily along, beginning to feel for the first time that their good fortune had deserted them at last.

Not one would confess it, but he would have given anything at command could he have been safely at home at that moment, with the deeds of the past few days wiped out and undone forever.

The sky, which had been sunshiny in the morning, was now overcast, and they had not gone far when drops of rain began falling.

"We're going to get wet," ventured Billy Waylett.

"I don't care," replied Tommy, "I can't feel any worse than I do now."

A few minutes later a drizzling rain began falling, but, although they passed a house near the road, they did not stop, and kept on until their clothing was saturated. They were cold, chilly, and hungry, for noon had gone and all ate lightly in the morning.

"I'm tired out," said Billy, at last; "let's stop yonder and warm ourselves; maybe the folks will give us something to eat."

The dwelling stood a little way from the road, with which it communicated by means of a lane lined on both sides with tall trees. No one was visible around it, but they turned through the broad gate and hurried through the rain, which was still falling, with its cold, dismal pattering, every drop of which seemed to force its way through the clothing to their bodies.

About half the distance was passed when Tommy, who was slightly in advance of his companions, wheeled about and dashed for the highway again.

"There's a dog coming!" was his exclamation.

The others heard the threatening growl, and descried an immense canine coming down the lane like a runaway steam engine.

Nothing but a hurried flight was left to them, and they ran with the desperation of despair. Billy, being the younger and shorter, was unable to keep up with the others. His dumpy legs worked fast, but he fell behind, and his terrified yells a moment later announced that the dog had overtaken him and was attending to business.

His horrified companions stopped to give what help they could, but the dog, having extracted a goodly piece from Billy's garments, was satisfied to turn about and trot back to the house to receive the commendation of his master, who was standing on the porch and viewing the proceedings with much complacency.

An examination of Billy, who was still crying, showed that the skin had only been scratched, though his trousers had suffered frightfully. All had received such a scare that they determined to apply to no more houses for relief, even if the rain descended in torrents and they were starving.

And so they tramped wearily onward through the mud and wet, hungry and utterly miserable. It seemed to them that their homes were a thousand miles distant and they would never see them again.

They could not help picturing their warm, comfortable firesides, where their kind parents denied them nothing, and where they had spent so many happy days, with no thought of what they owed those loving ones whom they were treating with such ingratitude.

Tears were in the eyes of all three, and, though they grew so weary that they could hardly drag one foot after the other, they plodded along until the gathering darkness told them night was closing in.

They had met wagons, horsemen, and several persons on foot. From some of the last they made inquiries and learned that, although they had passed through several towns, they were yet south of Rahway. Their hunger became so gnawing that Tommy spent all their money in buying a lot of cakes, which they devoured with the avidity of savages, and felt hungry when none was left to eat.

To the inquiries made of them they returned evasive answers, and when they reached any one of the numerous towns and villages between New Brunswick and the Hudson, they hurried through them and into the open country, where the

people viewed them with less curiosity.

When the darkness became so deep that they could not very well see their way, it was necessary to decide where and how they were to spend the night. The drizzling rain was still falling; they were chilled to the bone, and so tired that they could hardly walk.

In the gathering gloom, they observed a barn near the highway, in which they concluded to take refuge, for it was impossible to walk farther, and no better shelter was likely to present itself.

But for the cruel reception received at the first house earlier in the afternoon, they would have asked for charity of some of the neighbors, and doubtless would have received kind treatment, for it would be unjust to describe all the people of that section as unfeeling and heartless.

Had they made their predicament known in any one of the towns, they would have been taken care of until their families could be communicated with; but they were too frightened to think of anything of that nature.

Halting a short way from the barn, Tommy cautiously advanced to make a reconnoissance. He walked timidly around it, but discovered nothing of any person, nor did he hear the growl of a watch-dog. The dwelling-house stood so far off that it was distinguished only by the lights twinkling from within.

When Tommy came to try the main door, however, it was locked, and he feared they were barred out. He persevered, and with a thrill of hope found the stable-door unfastened--a piece of carelessness on the part of the owner, unless he meant to return shortly.

The lad whistled to his companions waiting in the road, and they hurried to his side. Telling them the cheering news, he let them pass in ahead of him, after which he carefully closed the door as it was before.

Then followed several minutes of groping in the dark, during which Jimmy narrowly missed receiving a dangerous kick from one of the horses, and at last the hay-mow was located. With considerable labor they crawled to the top, covered their shivering bodies as best they could, and, nestling close together, to secure what warmth they could, sank almost immediately into deep slumber.

They were so utterly worn out that neither opened his eyes until the sun was above the horizon. The storm had cleared away, the air was cool, and though their bodies were stiffened and half-famished, they were in better spirits than when they clambered into the refuge.

When all had fully awakened and rubbed their eyes, they sat for a moment or two on the hay, considering what could be done.

"I'm so hungry," said Billy Waylett, "that I feel as though I could eat this hay."

"And I'll chew some of the meal if we can't do any better," added Jim.

"Both of you together aint half as hungry as *I* am," said Tommy, "and I'm going to the house to ask for something to eat."

"Maybe they've got a dog," suggested Billy, with a shudder.

"I don't care if they have; I'll kill and eat *him*."

From this it will be seen that the young Indian slayers were in a sorry plight indeed.

"You fellers stay here," said Tommy, "while I fix things, and then I'll send for you; I'm bound to do something or die, for I can't stand this any longer--"

Just then the barn door opened, and several persons entered.

"I think we'll find them in here," remarked one; "they couldn't have traveled much farther."

"But I don't see how the young rascals could get in my barn."

"We'll take a look through that haymow."

And the next minute the head and shoulders of a burly man rose to view, and the runaways were discovered.

CHAPTER VI--SOWING SEED

Two men remained standing on the floor below, and the one who climbed the hay-mow was Hungerford, Chief of Police of Ashton. He had struck the trail of the runaways in Jersey City, and when he learned of three boys that had left the train at New Brunswick, he was certain they were the young rogues whom he was looking for.

He hired a horse and wagon in the city, secured the help and guidance of an officer well acquainted with the country, and by judicious inquiry retained the trail. He was so far behind the boys, however, that it was growing dark when he was only half a dozen miles out of the city, and he was obliged to put up for the night.

He was at it again before daylight, and the couple used their wits with such effect that before long they fixed upon the barn where the boys had taken refuge. An examination of the road and damp earth revealed the tell-tale footprints, and they applied to the farmer for his aid in searching the barn.

That gentleman was surprised to find he had forgotten to lock the stable-door, but such was the fact, and a brief search brought the runaways to light.

When they recognized the chief of police, they broke down and cried so pitifully that the heart of the officer was touched. He cheered them as best he could, and after they were taken to the house, given a warm breakfast and their clothing was dried, they felt, as may be said, like giants refreshed with new wine.

All were eager to be taken home. They had had enough of adventure, and were willing to face any punishment awaiting them, if they could only see Ashton again. Mr. Hungerford was confident that the three would receive the chastisement they merited, but he gave no hint of his belief, and prepared to take them thither.

He paid the farmer for the meal, and then decided to drive back to New Brunswick, and make the real start from that point.

He had learned of the robbery the boys suffered, and he was determined to recover the valuable watch of Mr. Wagstaff from thieving Snakeroot Sam. His brother officer offered to give him all the help possible, though he warned him that the task would be both difficult and dangerous, because of the large number of vicious tramps in that section.

The first thing done, upon reaching New Brunswick, was to telegraph to Mr. Wagstaff that the runaways were found, with no harm having befallen them, and they might be expected home that evening. Then, leaving the boys by themselves, the officers set out for the tramp rendezvous, where better fortune than they anticipated awaited them.

Snakeroot Sam was well known to the New Brunswick officer, and they were fortunate enough to come upon him in the highway, where he had no companions. He was collared before he suspected their business, and the watch and chain were found on his person. Inasmuch as it would have involved considerable delay to bring the scamp to trial and conviction, besides getting the names of the runaways in the papers, Chief Hungerford took his satisfaction out of the tramp personally. The kick administered to Tommy Wagstaff was repaid with interest. Indeed, there is reason to believe that Sam felt the effects throughout most of the following summer. Certain it is that he never received such a shaking up in his life.

Just as it was growing dark, the boys arrived in Ashton and were at their respective homes to supper.

And then and there was made a mistake, so serious in its nature and so far-reaching in its consequences that it forms the basis of the narrative recorded in the following pages.

It will be remembered that each father concerned declared that, upon their return home, the boys should receive severe punishment for their flagrant offenses. Such was their resolve, and yet only one of the gentlemen carried it out.

Mr. Wagstaff and his wife were so grateful for the restoration of their son that they accepted his promise to be a better boy, and, after a mild reproof, he was restored to their grace and favor.

It was the same with the parents of Jimmy McGovern. He professed great contrition for his wrong-doing, and several days were devoted to a consideration of the matter, when he, too, was allowed to escape all punishment.

Billy Waylett, the youngest and least guilty, was the only one who suffered at the hands of his father. The latter loved his child as much as any parent could, and he felt more pain in inflicting the chastisement than did the lad in receiving it. But it was given from a sense of duty, and, as is always and invariably the case, the boy respected his parent for what he did. He knew he deserved it, and that it was meant for his own good.

What was the consequence? It marked a turning-point in the life of the lad. He comprehended, as never before, his

narrow escape from disgrace and ruin, and from that time forward became obedient, studious, and pure in thoughts, words, and deeds. He gave his parents and teachers no trouble, and developed into a worthy young man, who became the pride and happiness of his relatives.

Tommy and Jimmy chuckled together many times over their good fortune. They saw how indulgent their parents were, and enjoyed the mock heroism which attended a full knowledge of their exploit.

They did not give up their hopes of a life of adventure, and became dissatisfied with the dull humdrum routine of Ashton. They were content, however, to bide their time, and to wait till they became older before carrying out the projects formed years before. The seed unwittingly sown by their thoughtless parents was sure to bring its harvest sooner or later.

Two years after the runaway incidents the parents of Tommy Wagstaff and Jimmy McGovern removed to the city of New York, and in that great metropolis the boys were not long in finding bad associates. The preliminary steps were taken in their education which eventuated in the incidents that follow.

CHAPTER VII--ONE AFTERNOON IN AUTUMN

The lumbering old stage-coach that left Belmar one morning in autumn was bowling along at a merry rate, for the road was good, the grade slightly down-hill, and the September afternoon that was drawing to a close cool and bracing.

The day dawned bright and sunshiny, but the sky had become overcast, and Bill Lenman, who had driven the stage for twenty-odd years, declared that a storm was brewing, and was sure to overtake him before he could reach the little country town of Picketon, which was the terminus of his journey.

A railway line had been opened from this bright, wide-awake place, and, though the only public means of conveyance between Picketon and Belmar was the stage, its days were almost numbered, for the line was branching and spreading in nearly every direction.

Bill had picked up and set down passengers, on the long run, until now, as the day was closing, he had but a single companion, who sat on the seat directly behind him, and kept up a continuous run of questions and answers.

This gentleman's appearance suggested one of the most verdant of countrymen that ever passed beyond sight of his parent's home. He was fully six feet tall, with bright, twinkling-gray eyes, a long peaked nose, home-made clothing, and an honest, out-spoken manner which could not fail to command confidence anywhere.

He had made known his name to every person that had ridden five minutes in the coach, as Ethan Durrell, born in New England, and on a tour of pleasure. He had never before been far from the old homestead, but had worked hard all his life, and had some money saved up, and his parents consented to let him enjoy his vacation in his own way.

"You see, I could have got to Picketon by the railroad," he said, leaning forward over the back of Lenman's seat and peering good-naturedly into his face, "but consarn the railroads! I don't think they ever oughter been allowed. I read in the *Weekly Bugle*, just afore I left home, that somewhere out West a cow got on the track and wouldn't get off! No, sir, *wouldn't get off*, till the engine run into her and throwed her off the track, and likewise throwed itself off, and some of the folks on board come mighty nigh getting hurt."

The driver was naturally prejudiced against railways, and was glad to agree with Ethan's sentiments.

"Yas," he said, as he nipped a fly off the ear of the near horse, by a swing of his long lash, "there ought to be a law agin them railroads; what's the use of folks being in such a hurry, that they want to ride a mile a minute! What good does it do 'em? Why aint they content to set in a coach like this and admire the country as they ride through it?"

"Them's been my sentiments ever since I knowed anything," replied the New Englander, with enthusiasm, "but it looks as everbody is fools except us, Bill, eh?" laughed Ethan, reaching over and chucking the driver in the side; "leastways, as we can't bender 'em from doing as they please, why, we won't try."

"I guess you're 'bout right," growled Bill, who could not see the stage-coach approaching its last run without a feeling of dissatisfaction, if not sadness.

"Helloa!" exclaimed Ethan, in a low voice, "I guess you're going to have a couple more passengers."

"It looks that way; yes, they want to ride."

The coach had reached the bottom of the hill, and was rumbling toward the small, wooden bridge, beyond which the woods stretched on both sides of the highway, when two large boys climbed over the fence and, walking to the side of the road, indicated that they wished to take passage in the coach.

These young men were our old friends, Tom Wagstaff and Jim McGovern, and they were dressed in sporting costume, each carrying a fine rifle, revolver, and hunting-knife. Although they had not yet executed their plan of a campaign against the aborigines of the West, they were on a hunting jaunt, and were returning, without having met with much success.

The young men had hardly taken their seats in the stage when Wagstaff produced a flask and invited the driver and Ethan Durrell to join him and his friend. The invitation being declined, McGovern drew forth a package of cigarettes, and he and Tom soon filled the interior of the coach with the nauseating odor. But for the thorough ventilation, Ethan declared he would have been made ill.

Tom and Jim were not long in finding a subject for amusement in the person of the New Englander. He was as eager as they to talk, and Bill, sitting in front with the lines in hand, turned sideways and grinned as he strove not to lose a word of the conversation.

"Are you going to Piketon?" asked Ethan, when the young men were fairly seated in the stage.

"That's the town we started for," replied Wagstaff.

"Ever been there before?"

"No; we're on our way to visit our friend, Bob Budd; we live in New York, and Bob spent several weeks down there last spring, when we made his acquaintance. Bob is a mighty good fellow, and we promised to come out and spend our vacation with him, though it's rather late in the season for a vacation. I say, driver, do you know Bob?"

"Oh! yes," replied Lenman, looking back in the faces of the young men; "I've knowed him ever since he was a little chit; he lives with his Uncle Jim now--rich old chap--and lets Bob do just as he pleases 'bout everything."

"That's the right kind of uncle to have," remarked Jim; "I wouldn't mind owning one of them myself. Bob wrote us that he was going to camp out near a big mill-pond and some mountains; of course, driver, you know the place."

"I was born and reared in this part of the country; I don't know the exact spot where Bob means to make his camp, but I've no doubt you'll enjoy yourselves."

"It won't be our fault if we don't," said Tom, with a laugh; "that's how we came to leave the governor, without asking permission or saying good-bye."

"I hope you didn't run away from home, boys," said Ethan, in a grieved manner.

"No, we didn't run away," said Jim, "we *walked*."

Ethan Durrell checked the reproof he was about to utter, and the young men laughed.

"You'll be sorry for it some day," remarked the New Englander, "you may depend on that."

"Did you ever try it?" asked Wagstaff.

"I did once, but I didn't get fur; the old gentleman overtook me a half-mile down the road; he had a big hickory in one hand and with the other he grabbed me by the nape of the neck; well," added the gentleman, with a sigh, "I guess there's no need of saying anything more."

"He must have had a father like Billy Waylett," remarked Jim, aside to his companion, both of whom laughed at the story of their new friend, "he wasn't as lucky as we."

The reader has already learned considerable about these two young men. They were wayward, disobedient, and fond of forbidden pleasures. It was the intention of their parents to place them in school that autumn, but while arrangements were under way the couple stealthily left home, first providing themselves with fine hunting outfits, and started for Piketon, with the intention of spending a couple of weeks in the woods.

They did not make their plans known to Billy Waylett, who was such a willing companion several years before. Billy still lived in Ashton and could have been easily reached, but they knew that he would not only reject their proposal, but, as likely as not, acquaint their parents with it.

The unwise indulgence of Mr. Wagstaff and Mr. McGovern was producing its inevitable fruit. They had had much trouble with their boys, but hoped as they grew older, and finished sowing their wild oats, they would settle down into sedate, studious men, and that the end of all their parents' worryment would soon come.

Among the undesirable acquaintances made by Jim and Tom was Bob Budd, who, as they intimated, spent several weeks in the city of New York. He was a native of Piketon, which was becoming altogether too slow for him. He chafed under the restraints of so small a country town, and wrote them glowing accounts of the good times they would have together in the camp in the woods. He urged them to come at once, now that the hunting season was at hand.

Tom and Jim were captivated by his radiant pictures, and determined to accept his invitation, whether their parents consented or not. The near approach of the time set for their entrance at the high school made the prospect in that direction too distasteful to be faced.

While they were still hesitating, with vivid recollections of the dismal failure of their earlier years, another letter came from Bob Budd. He told them he had not only selected the spot for their camp, but that the tent was up, and it was well stocked with refreshments of both a solid and liquid nature. He had painted a big sign, which was suspended to the ridge-pole and bore the legend,

"CAMP OF THE PIKETON RANGERS."

This was not only ornamental, but served as a warning to all trespassers.

"Everything is ready," wrote Bob, "and every day's delay is just so much taken from the sport and enjoyment that await you. Come at once, boys, and you'll never regret it."

CHAPTER VIII--FELLOW-PASSENGERS

The two decided to give Bob Budd a surprise. They said it would be hard for them to get away, and more than likely they would have to wait several weeks before the matter could be decided. This letter was followed at once by themselves, and they were now within a few miles of Bob's home without his suspecting anything of the kind.

Having informed themselves fully, they rode to a station not far from Picketon, where they got off, leaving their trunks to go to the town, while they spent a half-day in hunting. Their luck was so poor that they gave it up, and were glad to use the stage for the rest of the journey.

"What time are you due in Picketon?" asked Jim of the driver.

"Half-past eight."

"That's a good deal after dark."

"So it is, at this time of the year, and it's going to be dark sooner than usual."

"How's that?"

"Don't you notice how it has clouded up this afternoon? A big storm is coming and we're going to catch it afore we strike Picketon."

"Well," growled Wagstaff, "that isn't pleasant; we were fools, Jim, that we didn't stay in the train; but we can shut ourselves in with the curtains and let the driver run things."

"I reckon I haven't druv over this road for twenty-five years," said Lenman, "without striking a storm afore to-night."

"Sartinly, sartinly," added Ethan Durrell; "life must have its shadows as well as sunshine, though I don't like to be caught on a lonely road this way. I say, Bill," he added, in a half-frightened voice, "are you troubled with any such pesky things as highway robbers?"

"If you hadn't asked me that question I wouldn't have said anything about it; but I've been stopped and held up, as they say, just like them chaps out West."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the New Englander, while the young men on the back seat became interested.

"I didn't suppose you were ever troubled in this part of the world by such people," said Wagstaff.

"We aint often, but what place can you name where you don't find bad people?"

"How long ago was it you were held up?" asked Ethan.

"About six months; fact is, I've felt shaky for the last week."

"Why so?" asked Wagstaff.

"I've seen a suspicious character down in Black Bear Swamp."

"Where's that?"

"It's a piece of woods we pass through afore we reach Picketon; it jines the woods where you tell me Bob Budd has put up the tent, but it curves round and reaches the hills on t'other side."

The words of the driver deeply interested all three of the passengers. The knowledge that, though in the State of Pennsylvania, and in a section fairly well settled, they were in danger of being "held up" in the most approved style of the wild West was enough to startle any one.

"Tell us all about it," persisted Wagstaff, lighting a new cigarette, and leaning forward to catch the reply.

"There isn't much to tell," replied the driver; "cept there's a holler close to t'other side of Black Bear Swamp, and three times in the past week, when I was passing, I've seen a tall, slim man moving around among the trees and watching me, tryin' at the same time to keep me from seeing him."

"But if he was a robber--"

"Who said he was a robber?" demanded Lenman, turning and looking sharply at the young man.

"You said he was a suspicious character, and what else could he be?" demanded Wagstaff.

"Perhaps a tramp, but I'll admit I have thought it likely he was a man looking for a chance to rob the stage." "Why

didn't he do it then?"

"It happened that on each of the times I hadn't a single passenger with me."

"And now you've got *three*," remarked McGovern. "Well, I hope he will attack us to-night."

"What'll you do if he does?" asked the New Englander.

"Don't you see we've each got a rifle? Beside that, Tom and I carry a Smith & Wesson apiece, and all our weapons are loaded; that fellow won't have time to call out for us to give up our valuables before he'll be filled as full of holes as a sieve."

"My gracious! you wouldn't do *that*, would you?"

"Just give us a chance, that's all," said Wagstaff, with a shake of his head.

Had the young men been watching Durrell and the driver at that moment, they would have seen a singular look pass between the two. It might have meant nothing, and it might have signified a good deal. No words were spoken, but the expression of their faces, to say the least, was peculiar.

"I should have said," continued the driver, "that the chap may have learned something about that box, which was expected at Belmar, and which I was to take to Piketon with me."

"What box?" asked Wagstaff.

"The one that is strapped onto the rear of the stage."

"Jingo!" muttered Jim, "things are beginning to look dubious."

"As I was about to say," continued the driver, "if that chap has made up his mind to hold us up--and it looks mighty like it--this is the night it will be done."

"Why do you say that?"

"Haven't I got three passengers for Piketon, which is the biggest number I've took through in a couple of weeks, and, more'n all, *that* box is with me? The night is going to be as dark as a wolf's mouth, and when we strike Black Bear Swamp--"

"Why do they call it Black Bear Swamp?" asked Durrell.

"I don't know of any reason, onless it is that there never was a black bear found there, though they're up among the mountains, where there's a deer now and then. But won't the scamp be fooled, though?" chuckled the driver.

"How's that?"

"I never carry any shooting-irons, but you've got enough for us all, and, when he sings out and you shove the muzzles of your guns forward and let drive, why the State will be saved a big expense."

"That's so!" exclaimed Wagstaff, with a fierceness too vivid to be wholly genuine; "we've started out for a hunting trip with Bob Budd, and expect to bag all the bears and deer in the country, but we weren't looking for stage robbers, because I don't know that we have lost any, but if they choose to run into our way, why who's to blame?"

"That's so," assented his companion, who, in truth, regretted more than ever that they had not made the entire journey to Piketon by train instead of partly in the lumbering stage-coach.

"It would be better," he added, after a moment's thought, "if the rogue had chosen the daytime."

"Why so?" queried the New Englander.

"We can see to aim better."

"So can *he*, can't he?"

"Yes, but we would have prepared better than we can at night," replied Wagstaff, nervously.

"And it would be the same with *him*. If you're afraid you can't shoot straight, I'll take one gun and Bill the other, and you can crawl under the seats."

"Who's talking about crawling under the seats--what's that?"

A peal of thunder rumbled overhead, and it was already beginning to grow dark. The afternoon was merging into night, which, as has been explained, was closing in sooner than usual, because of the cloudy sky.

"We're going to catch it afore we get home," remarked the driver, glancing upward and twitching the lines, so as to force the team into a moderate trot.

"Why don't you hurry up your nags more, and get home sooner?" asked Wagstaff.

"A good master is merciful to his beast; I aint likely to gain anything by hurrying, for the storm may come and be over afore we get to town, while the animals are so used to this work, that, if I made it a rule to push 'em now and then, they are likely to break down, and trade aint good enough for me to afford *that*."

"But if you should do it once, it wouldn't hurt."

"Another thing," added the driver, as if the fact was a clincher to the discussion, "if we should go rattling through Black Bear Swamp ahead of time, that suspicious chap would miss us."

"Well?"

"And we would miss *him*, which we don't want to do. Being as you've got your guns and are so anxious to use 'em on him, why I won't be mean enough to rob you of the chance."

CHAPTER IX--DICK HALLIARD

The conversation was not of a nature to improve the courage of the occupants of the stagecoach, for, when children spend an evening in exchanging ghost stories, they find the darkness of their bed-rooms more fearful than before.

Since the young gentlemen on the rear seat began to believe that a meeting with a stage robber was quite certain to take place before reaching Piketon, they saw the need of an understanding all round.

The driver repeated that he never carried firearms, for, if he did, he would be tempted to use them with the surety of getting himself into trouble.

"If a man orders you to hold up your hands and you do it, why he aint going to hurt you," was the philosophy of the old man; "all he'll do is just to go through you; but if you have a gun or pistol, you'll bang away with it, miss the chap, and then he'll bore you; so it's my rule, when them scamps come along, to do just as they tell me; a man's life is worth more to him than all his money, and that's me every time."

"But you might be quick enough to drop him first," suggested Wagstaff, who would have preferred the driver to be not quite so convincing in his arguments.

"Mighty little chance of that! You see the feller among the trees is all ready and waiting; he can take his aim afore you know he is there; now when you fellers fire at him it won't do for you to miss--remember *that!*"

"We don't intend to," replied McGovern.

"Of course you don't intend to, but the chances are that you will, and then it will be the last of you!"

"But won't you be apt to catch it on the front seat?"



THE MEETING WITH DICK HALLIARD

"Not a bit of it, for them chaps are quick to know where a shot comes from, and they always go for the one that fires; they know, too, that a stage driver never fights--helloa!"

At that moment, a bicycle guided by a boy glided silently along the right of the stage, turning out just enough to pass the vehicle. The youth whose shapely legs were propelling it, slackened his gait so that for a few minutes he held his place beside the front wheels of the coach.

He was a handsome, bright-faced youth about sixteen years old, who greeted the driver pleasantly, and, turning his head, saluted the others, without waiting for an introduction.

"I'm afraid a storm is coming, and I shall have to travel fast to get home ahead of it; do you want to run a race with me, Bill?"

"Not with *this* team," replied the driver, "for we couldn't hold a candle to you."

"I don't know about that," replied the boy, with a laugh; "there are plenty who can beat me on a bicycle."

"But there aint any of 'em in this part of the country, for I've seen too many of 'em try it. Bob Budd bragged that he would leave you out of sight, but you walked right away from him."

The boy blushed modestly and said:

"Bob don't practice as much as he ought; he's a good wheelman, but he's fonder of camping out in the woods, and I shouldn't be surprised if there's a good deal more fun in it. I believe he expects some friends to go into camp with him."

"Them's the chaps," remarked the driver, jerking the butt of his whip toward the rear seat.

The bicyclist bowed pleasantly to the young men, who were staring curiously at him and listening to the conversation. They nodded rather coldly in turn, for they had already begun to suspect the identity of this graceful, muscular lad, of whom they had heard much from Bob Budd.

Their country friend had spoken of a certain Dick Halliard who was employed in the store of Mr. Hunter, the leading merchant in Piketon, and who was so well liked by the merchant that he had presented him with an excellent bicycle, on which he occasionally took a spin when he could gain the time.

Bob, who detested young Halliard, had said enough to prove that he had taken the lead in all his studies at school and surpassed every boy in the section in running, swimming, 'cycling, and indeed, in all kinds of athletic sports. This was one reason for Bob's dislike, but the chief cause was the integrity and manliness of young Halliard, who not only held no fear of the bully, but did not hesitate to condemn him to his face when he did wrong.

"I hope you will have a good time in camp," said Dick (for it was he), addressing the two city youths.

"That's what we're out for," replied Wagstaff, "and it won't be our fault if we don't; will you join us?" asked the speaker, producing his flask.

"I'm obliged to you, but must decline."

"Maybe you think it isn't good enough for you," was the mean remark of Wagstaff.

"I prefer water."

"Ah, you're one of the good boys who don't do anything naughty."

It was a mean remark on the part of Wagstaff, who was seeking a quarrel, but Dick Halliard showed his manliness by paying no heed to the slur.

"Well," said he, addressing the driver, "since you won't run me a race, I shall have to try to reach home ahead of the storm. Good-bye all!"

The muscular legs began moving faster, the big, skeleton-like wheel shot ahead of the stage, coming back into the middle of the highway, and the lad, with his shoulders bent forward, spun down the road with a speed that would have forced the fastest trotting horse to considerable effort.

"By gracious!" exclaimed the New Englander, with his chin high in air, as he peered over the head of the driver, "that youngster beats anything of the kind I ever seen."

"I don't s'pose they have those sort of playthings in your part of the world," remarked Jim, with a sneer.

"Yes, we have enough to send a few of 'em down your way for you folks to learn on. Bill, who is that chap?"

"Dick Halliard, and there aint a finer boy in Piketon."

"He's got a mighty fine face and figure."

"You're right about that; I want to give you chaps a little advice," added the driver, turning his head, so as to look into the countenance of the city youths; "I heerd what you said to him and he had sense enough not to notice it, but you'll be wise if you let Dick Halliard alone."

"Is he dangerous?" asked Wagstaff, with a grin.

"You will find him so, if you undertake to put onto him; mebbe he isn't quite so old as you and mebbe he don't smoke cigarettes and drink whisky, but I'll bet this whole team that if either or both of you ever tackles him, you'll think five minutes later that you've been run through a thrashing mill."

The youths were not disturbed by this bold statement, which neither believed.

"You're very kind," said Tom, "and we won't forget what you've said; when we see him coming 'long the road, we'll climb a tree to get out of the way, or else run into the first house and lock the door."

Bill had said all he wished, and now gave his attention to his team. The thunder was rumbling almost continuously, and now and then a vivid streak of lightning zigzagged across the rapidly darkening sky. No rain fell, but the wind blew blinding clouds of dust across the highway and into the stage, where the occupants at times had to protect their eyes from it.

A short distance from the road on the left was a low, old-fashioned stone house, but no other dwelling was in sight between the stage and Black Bear Swamp, which was no more than half a mile ahead, appearing dark and forbidding in the gathering gloom. The trees at the side of the highway swayed in the gusty wind, and, when the flying dust allowed them to see, Dick Halliard was observed far in advance like a speck in the distance. He was traveling with great speed, and the stage seemed to have gone no more than a hundred yards after the interview when the young wheelman disappeared.

It was as if he had plunged under full headway right among the trees. Picketon lay about two miles beyond Black Bear Swamp, but since the width of the dense forest through which the public road wound its way was fully a fourth of a mile, it will be seen that a considerable drive was still before the stage.

The passengers would have viewed their approach to the woods with relief, but for the fear of the highwayman. Its dense growth and abundant vegetation offered a partial protection from the storm, which promised to be violent; but the youths would have much preferred (had they dared to speak their sentiments) to stand bareheaded in the coming storm than to encounter that "suspicious" party, who they believed was awaiting their coming.

CHAPTER X--A STARTLING SUMMONS

The stage was within a hundred yards of Black Bear Swamp when something like a tornado struck it. The horses stopped, and the vehicle was partly lifted from the ground. For an instant it seemed to be going over. The driver and the New Englander started with suppressed exclamations, while Wagstaff emitted a cry of alarm, as he and his companion attempted to leap out.

"Sit still! you're all right!" shouted Lenman, striking his horses with the whip. They broke into a trot, and a few minutes later entered the dense wood, where they were safe from the danger that threatened them a moment before. Indeed, the volley of wind was as brief as a discharge of musketry, passing instantly, though it still howled through the wood, with a dismal effect, which made all heartily wish they were somewhere else.

It was so dark that, but for the flashes of lightning, the passengers would have been unable to see each other's forms; but the horses were so familiar with the route that they needed no guidance. The driver allowed them to walk, while he held the lines taut to check them on the instant it might be necessary.

Wagstaff and McGovern climbed forward, and crowded themselves on the seat beside the New Englander, each firmly grasping his rifle, for, as they advanced into the wood, their thoughts were of the criminal who they believed would challenge them before they could reach the other side.

Still the rain held off, though the lightning was almost incessant and continually showed the way in front. The wind, too, abated, and all began to breathe more freely.

"I guess the robber won't dare show himself to-night," said Wagstaff, speaking rather his wish than his belief.

"What's to hinder him?" asked Ethan Durrell.

"The storm."

The driver laughed outright.

"It's just what is in his favor--hulloa!"

"Gracious! what's the matter?" gasped Wagstaff, as the team suddenly halted, of their own accord; "let's get out."

"Something's wrong," replied Lenman; "don't speak or make any noise; we'll soon know what it is."

While waiting for the flash of lightning to illuminate the gloom, it never seemed so long coming. A short time before the gleams were continuous, but now the gloom was like that of Egypt as the seconds dragged along.

No one spoke, but all eyes were fixed on the impenetrable darkness in front, while every ear was strained to catch some sound beside the sighing of the wind among the trees.

All at once, as if the overwhelming storehouse of electricity could contain itself no longer, the whole space around, in front and above was lit up by one dazzling flame, which revealed everything with the vividness of a thousand noonday suns.

By its overpowering glare the figure of a man on horseback was seen motionless in the middle of the road, less than twenty feet distant. He knew of the presence of some one in his path, and he, too, was awaiting the help of the lightning before advancing.

"That's *him*," whispered Tom Wagstaff; "shall we shoot?"

Ethan Durrell felt the seat tremble under the youth, while the others noticed the quaver in his voice.

"No," replied the driver; "he hasn't done nothin' yet; wait till he hails us."

"That may be too late, but all right."

"Helloa, Bill, is that you?" came from the horseman.

"Yes; who are you?" called back the driver.

"Don't you know me, Hank Babcock?" called the other, with a laugh.

"I sort of thought it was you, Hank, but wasn't sure."

"You can be sure of it now; wait a minute till I get out of your way; I'll turn aside and let you pass."

Everything was quiet for a moment, except the wind, the snuffing of his horse, and the sound of his hoofs, as he was forced with some trouble close to the trees which grew near the highway.

"Now, it's all right; go ahead," called Hank Babcock.

Lenman spoke to his animals and they moved forward. When opposite the horseman, another flash revealed him sitting astride the animal, a few feet to one side. He called a cheery good-night as he drew back, after the stage had passed, and continued his course.

"Driver," said Wagstaff, when they were moving again; "where is the spot you thought it likely we would meet him?"

"We're close to it now; you notice the road goes down a little, but not enough for me to put on the brake; have your shootin' irons ready, for, somehow or other, I feel in my bones that you'll need 'em."

"Where's that chap that was here a minute ago?" asked Jim, with as much tremor in his voice as his friend.

"Who's that?" asked the driver.

"That Yankee that was sitting right here; he's gone!"

"I guess not," replied the driver, reaching back his hand and groping vaguely around; "he must be there."

"He isn't; he was here, but he's missing."

"Maybe he got so scared he took the back seat," suggested Tom, who held his rifle in his left hand, while he passed his right through the vacancy in the rear of the stage; "no, I'll be hanged if he is there; he isn't in the stage."

"That's mighty queer," remarked the driver; "I didn't hear him get out, did you?"

"No, but I felt him; he was sitting right alongside of us, when something brushed past me and he was gone--there!"

Once more the lightning brought everything out with intense distinctness, and all saw that there were only three instead of four persons in the stage.

The New Englander was missing: what had become of him?

"I guess he was scared," suggested Wagstaff, with a weak attempt to screw up his courage; "and preferred to hide among the trees rather than run the risk of meeting that stranger--"

"*Sh!*" interrupted the driver, "there's somebody ahead of us in the road; the horses see him; be ready and remember that if you miss it's sure death--"

At that moment the most startling cry that could fall upon their ears rang from the gloom in front:

"Hands up, every one of you!"

CHAPTER XI--NO JOKE

What more alarming summons can be imagined than that which rang from the darkness in front of the stage, as it was slowly winding its way through Black Bear Swamp?

The lightning which had toyed with them before seemed unwilling to do so again, for the impenetrable night was not lit up by the first quiver or flutter of the intense fire.

"Are you ready to shoot?" asked the driver, turning his head and speaking in guarded tones.

"My gracious, no!" replied Wagstaff, as well as he could between his chattering teeth; "I can't see him."

"He's right there in the middle of the road; don't hit one of the horses--what are you trying to do?"

It was plain enough what the valiant youth was doing; he was crawling under the seat, the difficulty of doing so being increased by the body of Jim, who was ahead of him in seeking the refuge.

"I aint going to fire when there's no chance of hitting him," growled Tom, still twisting and edging his way out of reach.

"But the lightning will show him to you in a minute."

"Let it show and be hanged! I've got enough; I surrender."

The words had been spoken hastily, and Tom and Jim did not throw away any seconds in groping for cover, but, brief as was the time, the terrible fellow in the middle of the road became impatient.

"Are all them hands up?" he roared, "or shall I open fire?"

"My two passengers are under the seat, but they won't hurt you--"

The driver checked himself for a moment and then exclaimed, loud enough for the youths to hear:

"He's coming into the wagon!"

"Heavens! don't let him do that," protested Jim; "he'll kill us all; tell him we surrender and won't shoot."

"Where's them young men that were going to fire so quick?" demanded the fellow, hurriedly climbing into the front of the stage; "let me have a chance at them!"

"It wasn't us," called back Wagstaff, "we haven't anything against you; take all we've got, only spare us; you can have our guns and pistols and our money, and everything we have--"

He ceased his appeal, for at that moment he heard some one laugh.

A shuddering suspicion of the truth came over him, but before he could frame an explanation, Bill Lenman and the man who had just joined the party broke into uproarious mirth.

The youths saw how utterly they had been sold. There was no train robber. Ethan Durrell had played the part of the heavy villain in order to test the courage of these vaunting lads. The driver tried to dissuade him from the trick, afraid of the risk incurred, but, as it proved, he was never in any danger.

The boys crept back from their concealment, and, resuming their seat in front, saw that it was useless to deny the dilemma in which they were placed.

"I don't see anything smart in a trick like that," said Tom, angrily; "some folks have queer ideas of a joke."

"It's lucky for you," added Jim, "that the lightning didn't show you to us; I had my gun aimed and was just ready to fire, but couldn't see clear enough to make sure of dropping you at the first shot."

"All that I was afeared of," said the driver, "was that you would hit one of the horses, and that's what you would have done."

"It would have served you right if I had."

"But it would have been a costly job for you, young man."

The team had resumed its progress and the violent flurry of the elements began subsiding. The flashes were less frequent, though they appeared often enough to show the course of the stage, as the animals pressed on at a moderate walk.

The driver and the New Englander were more considerate than most persons would have been under the

circumstances, for they forebore taunting the youths, whom they had at their mercy. Tom and Jim were resentful enough to have used violence toward Durrell, who had turned the tables so cleverly on them; but the manner in which he did it gave them a wholesome fear of the wiry fellow from down East.

"Then," said Tom, addressing the driver, "that was all stuff that you told us about seeing a suspicious person in these woods."

"No, sir, it was all true," was the unexpected reply.

This statement instantly awoke interest again in the question, for even Durrell had supposed the driver was playing with the fears of the boys.

"If that's the case," he said, "we may have trouble yet, though it gets me how a man dare try anything like that in this part of the world."

"They haven't tried it yet," was the reminder of Lenman.

"No, and I guess they won't; but from what I've read and heard tell, it's just such crimes that succeed, 'cause nobody expects anybody would dare try them."

That night was an eventful one in the history of the occupants of the old stage-coach plying between Belmar and Piketon. That the driver was uneasy was shown by his silence and his close attention to his team and matters in front. He took no part in the conversation, but let the others do the talking while he listened and watched.

All noticed the rapid clearing of the sky. The disturbance of the air was peculiar, for, while it threatened a severe rainfall, nothing of the kind took place, not a drop pattering on the leaves. The electric conditions changed back again to something like a normal state, the lightning ceasing, the wind falling, and the clouds dissolving to such an extent that, before Black Bear Swamp was crossed enough moonlight penetrated the woods to reveal their course.

It was a singular sight when the party in the stage found themselves able to see the ears of the horses, and, soon after, the trees at the side of the road, and by and by could make them out for several paces in front of the team.

This was a vast relief, but the boys, instead of resuming their places at the rear of the coach, kept the second seat in front, while Durrell put himself beside the driver, where both had the best opportunity for discovering any peril the instant it presented itself.

"Do you think there will be any trouble?" asked the New Englander, after being silent a minute or two.

"I don't know what to think," was the discomfiting reply.

"But we are getting pretty well through the plaguey place; it can't be fur from t'other side."

"That don't make any difference; one spot in these woods is as bad as another."

"I'm sorry I haven't a pistol," said Durrell.

"I aint, for I tell you it won't do to try to use anything like that on them chaps."

"If there were several it might be different, but the idea of two of us surrendering to one man--it galls me, Bill. I was going to get one of them boys to let me have a revolver, but I don't want to do it as long as you feel this way."

"I wouldn't have it for the world; if I was sure there was but the one, I don't know as I would object--that is, if you wanted to fight purty bad."

"You seen only one man, you told me."

"But that's no sign there isn't others near."

"True. By gracious, Bill!" whispered the New Englander, peering forward and to one side in the gloom; "I believe I *did* see a person in front of us just then."

"I didn't notice him," replied the driver, trying hard to pierce the gloom; "where is he?"

"Not in the middle of the road, but on the left."

That was the side on which Durrell was sitting, so that he had a better opportunity than the driver. He believed something moved, but the shadows among the trees were too dense to make sure. The fact that the horses had shown no sign of fear was good reason to suspect Durrell was mistaken, but enough doubt remained to cause misgiving.

They talked so low that the boys behind them could only catch the murmur of their voices, without being able to understand their words. They were in such trepidation themselves that they forgot their recent farce, and, speaking only now and then in whispers, used their eyes and ears for all they were worth.

"If any one stirs, he'll be shot!"

Some one at the side of the road uttered these words in a low but distinct voice, adding in the same terrible tones:

"Stop that team! There are three of us here, and we've got you covered; each one of you get down and stand at the side of the road and hold up your hands! Do as you are told and you won't get hurt! Try any of your tricks and you'll be riddled!"

Ethan Durrell was the only one in the stage who spoke. His voice trembled, so that his words were hardly understood.

"Don't shoot, please, we'll get down; we won't do anything if you'll be easy with us; be keerful them guns don't go off--"

"Shut up!" commanded the angry criminal; "we don't want any talking. Dick, keep your eye on 'em as they come out and don't stand any nonsense."

"Do you want me down there, too?" asked the driver, who fancied he ought to be excused.

"You can sit where you are, but don't forget you're covered, too, and don't stir. Come, hurry down, old chap!"

The last remark was addressed to Ethan Durrell, who showed some reluctance to obeying the stern order.

The fact was the New Englander was straining his eyes to the utmost. He saw the tall figure at the side of the highway, just abreast of the horses' shoulders, but he could not detect any one else. That might not signify anything, as nothing was easier than for several persons to conceal themselves among the trees.

The question the plucky Durrell was asking himself was whether they had been held up by one man or more. If there were more than one it was madness for him to resist, but if there was but one he meant to make a fight, even though he had nothing more formidable than his jack-knife about him.

He hesitated on the step in front, one hand resting on the haunch of the horse and the other grasping the front support of the cover of the coach.

"Don't wait," whispered Lenman, "or you'll make him mad."

"Hurry up," added Tom Wagstaff, "and we'll follow you."

"Come, I reckon you'd better hurry," added the figure at the side of the road.

"All right, here I come!"

The New Englander sprang outward, and as he did so he flung both arms about the neck of the rogue and bore him to the earth.

CHAPTER XII--THE VICTIM OF A MISTAKE.

Ethan Durrell may have been verdant-looking and peculiar in his ways, but he was one of the pluckiest of men. It was impossible for him to know whether the scamp who held up the stage had any companions or not, until the matter was proven by taking a risk which, if he went the wrong way, was sure to be fatal. With this uncertainty, and without so much as a single weapon at his command, he leaped upon the unsuspecting ruffian, and, throwing both arms around his neck, bore him to the ground.

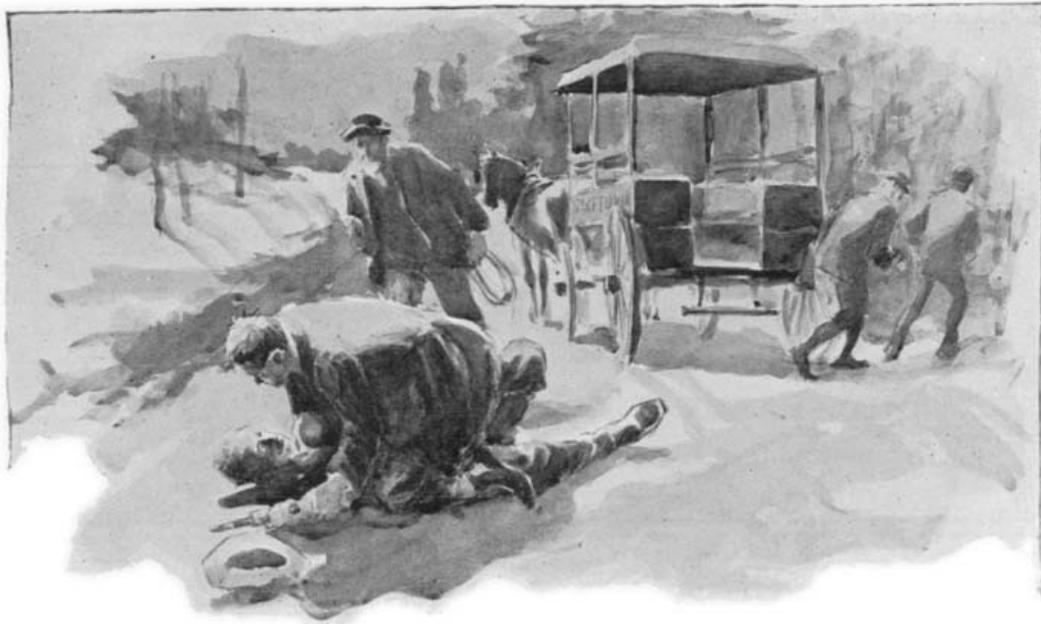
The attack was wholly unexpected by the fellow, who was standing with loaded revolver pointed toward the stage, ready to fire on the instant he observed anything suspicious. It was necessary for the New Englander to spring down from the front of the coach, but every one except himself thought his intention was to land in front of the other and there submit to the inevitable. The quavering voice of Durrell had convinced his friends that he was as timid as any of them in the presence of real danger.

He closed his arms like a vise, so as to pinion those of the stranger against his sides. The impetus of his own body drove the man backward, and before he could recover Ethan tripped and threw him with such violence that his hat fell off and an exclamation was forced from him.

He uttered fierce execrations and strove desperately to get his arm free that he might use his weapon on his assailant, but there was no possibility of shaking off the embrace of the wiry New Englander, who hung on like grim death.

"Bill, you and the boys watch out for the other fellers," called Durrell, as he struggled with the man; "if any of them show themselves, shoot! I'll 'tend to this one."

At this moment the rogue seemed to remember his friends, and he called:



IT'S NO USE! I'VE GOT YOU!

"Quick, Sam! Shoot him! Don't miss! Let him have it!"

Even in that excitement Ethan noticed that the fellow's appeal was to "Sam" instead of the imaginary "Dick," whom he first addressed. The suspicion that he was alone was strengthened, and the daring New Englander put forth all his power to subdue him.

"It's no use! I've got you and I'm going for you like two houses afire. Stand back, Bill, and don't interfere; if I can't bring him to terms, then I'm going to resign and climb a tree."

Everything was going like a whirlwind. Although Bill Lenman preferred on such occasions as the present to be a non-combatant, he was not the one to stay idle when a friend risked his life for him. He threw the lines over the horses' backs and sprang down to give what help he could; but in the darkness it was hard to decide in what way he could aid

the other. It was evident that Durrell was pushing matters with vigor, and there was no doubt that he expected to bring the rogue to terms.

But it was easy for one in Ethan's situation to be mistaken. As long as the fellow kept his pistol, the New Englander's life was in danger. Bill stooped over with the intention of twisting away the weapon, but at the moment of doing so it was discharged, apparently at the driver himself, for the bullet grazed his temple.

Finding himself unable to turn the pistol on his assailant, the ruffian saw a chance of deflecting the muzzle sufficiently to hit the new-comer, as he thought, and he fired, missing him by the narrowest margin conceivable.

Before he could fire again a vigorous kick of the driver sent the weapon flying off in the darkness.

"Keep your hands off!" called Durrell, the moment he discovered his friend was near him; "I can manage him alone. If you want to do anything get ready to tie him."

That was an easy matter, for stage-drivers are always supplied with extras, and a little skill will enable one to get along without a few straps already in use.

Durrell found his customer tough and powerful. He held him fast for some seconds, but he seemed as tireless as his assailant, and the contest would have been prolonged with the possibility of the fellow working himself loose and darting off among the trees; but fully mindful of this danger, the New Englander had recourse to heroic measures.

He tightened his grip on the fellow's throat until he gasped for breath. This was repeated to the danger point, though the man continued to struggle as long as he had the power.

But Durrell had no wish to punish him beyond what was necessary. He now called to the driver that he could give some help if he wished. Bill appeared to be bristling with straps and ropes, and was eager to do something, for, truth to tell, he felt ashamed that, after all he had said to the New Englander, the latter had attacked the fellow so bravely, while until this moment the one chiefly concerned had given no help at all. He was anxious to make amends.

Reading the purpose of his captors and knowing that if bound all help was at an end, the robber struggled like a wild cat. He fought, kicked, struck, bit, and shouted to his friends to come to his help, addressing them by names without number, but all in vain; he could not have been more helpless if enclosed by a regiment of men. Bill Lenman was skilled in tying knots, and in less time than it would be supposed the prisoner was so firmly bound that he resembled a mummy, so far as the use of his limbs was concerned.

The moment came when he gave up in despair. He saw the game was over, and it was throwing away his strength to resist further. While he had been so ready with speech, he ceased all utterances when the first knot was secured between his elbows, and resolutely refused to utter another word.

"What are you going to do with him?" asked Lenman, as they stood him like a post on his feet.

"What are we going to do with him? why, take him to Piketon, of course, and deliver him to justice!"

"I know that," replied Bill, with a laugh, "but I was thinking whether it was best to stow him under the seats or strap him with the trunks on behind; he might enjoy riding with *that* box."

"No; we'll take him inside with us; some of the straps might give way and we would want to be within reach of him. Where's them boys?" asked Durrell, abruptly; "I forgot all about them while this business was going on."

The attack and capture of the would-be stage robber consumed very little time, but it gave a chance to our young friends which they quickly turned to good account. They saw but one possible result of the affair, and concluded to make a change of base. It could not be doubted that they had done so, since neither was within sight or call.

Lenman had paid no attention to them, and it cannot be said that he regretted their absence. True, their fare remained uncollected, but that was not the first time he had carried passengers free, and he could stand it again.

The prisoner was deposited with as much care on the middle seat of the stage as though he were a package of dynamite. Durrell placed himself behind him where he could forestall any movement on his part. It would not be supposed that there was any chance of anything of that kind, but Durrell had read and heard enough of such people to understand the danger of trusting to appearances. The exploits of some of the gentry in the way of tying and untying knots would rival the Davenport brothers and other so-called "mediums." Then, too, Durrell thought, he might have other weapons about him, for no search had been made of his garments. Anyway, it cannot be doubted that the New Englander was wise in maintaining such a vigilant watch of the fellow.

Despite this exciting incident, which threw Bill Lenman's nerves into a more turbulent state than for years, he could not help smiling as he listened to the efforts of the New Englander to open conversation with the prisoner. Durrell's curiosity was of the kind that it could not be kept in the background. He was interested in the man and was resolved to learn more about him.

He began in his insinuating way to inquire as to his name, how long he had been in this bad business, what led him to make such a dreadful mistake, where he was born, whether his parents were living, how many brothers and sisters he had, and so on with a list of questions which no one could remember.

But the prisoner never once opened his mouth. He saw nothing was to be gained by so doing, and, though it is not to be supposed he would have told the truth, he did not trouble himself to state fiction.

At the moment of emerging from Black Bear Swamp, Lenman was alarmed by being hailed by a stranger who asked for a ride. This was unusual, for he was now so close to Piketon that the walk would not have taxed any one.

Durrell whispered to the driver to refuse to take him up, for no doubt he was a confederate of the prisoner; but Lenman thought it more dangerous to refuse than to comply. He therefore checked his team, and told the applicant that the town was near by and he was about to indulge in a needless expense; but the stranger cared naught for that, and hastily climbed up in front and seated himself beside the driver, who peered at him as best he could in the gloom, but was unable to make out his features.

"If he tries any tricks," said Lenman to himself, "I'll neck him before he knows it; after that chap from New England showed such pluck I aint going to back out of the next rumpus."

Evidently the driver felt the force of the example, for he kept a close eye on the stranger. Besides this, he thought the occasion warranted a little extra urging of the horses, and he put them to the briskest trot they had shown since leaving Belmar.

Ethan Durrell, as may be supposed, was fully as anxious as the driver, for he was almost certain the man in front was a friend of the prisoner, and if so, there was little to prevent a rescue, since, as I have shown, neither Durrell nor Lenman was armed.

The relief, therefore, was great when the lights of the little town glimmered through the darkness, and shortly after the stage came to a halt in front of the old-fashioned inn, where it had stopped regularly for so many years.

The passenger last picked up, there was reason to believe, had never seen the rogue before. The latter may be dismissed with the remark that, having been caught in the commission of his crime, he received full and merited punishment therefor.

CHAPTER XIII--ADRIFT IN THE SWAMP

Meanwhile Tom Wagstaff and Jim McGovern, the two youths from New York, found themselves involved in a series of singular and stirring incidents.

It will be admitted that they were not fond of meeting the kind of persons who brought the old stage to a standstill in the dismal depths of Black Bear Swamp, and, when they saw an opportunity to leave, lost no time in doing so.

They were trembling in their seats, wondering what would be the next act of the dreaded fellow dimly seen in the gloom, when Ethan Durrell performed his brave exploit which ended in the capture of the rogue.

"Now's our chance!" whispered Jim, who saw the couple struggling on the ground; "bimeby he'll kill that greenhorn and next the driver and then *our* turn will come."

"If that's so, I don't see any use in waiting," replied Tom, losing no time in scrambling out of the coach, and dropping to the ground in such haste that he fell forward on his hands and knees.

The driver and the New Englander were too much engaged at that moment to pay any heed to the youths, who were in such desperate haste to get away from the spot that they dashed among the trees at the imminent risk of seriously bruising themselves.

After pressing forward until they were nearly out of breath, they came to a halt in the depths of the wood for consultation. They had managed to reach a point some distance from the highway, where they felt safe for the time.

"It's lucky we were cool enough to bring our guns with us," was the bright remark of McGovern, "or there's no telling what might have happened."

"Do you think those robbers will follow us, Jim?"

"Of course they will; you don't suppose they want us to testify in court against them and have them hanged, do you?"

"But we didn't see them plain enough to know them again."

"That don't make any difference," was the brilliant reply, "for I would know that fellow's voice among a thousand."

"I guess maybe you're right; it won't do for us to go back to the road, for we would be sure to run against them."

"No; we'll push on through the woods till we come out somewhere. If we were only acquainted with the country we would know what to do, but there's no saying where we'll fetch up."

At such times a person feels safer while in motion, and, though the young men had no more idea of the points of the compass than if adrift in mid-ocean, they pressed on, impelled by their anxiety to place all the space possible between themselves and the stage-robbers, who, they believed, numbered three at least.

They agreed that the New Englander was the most foolish of persons in attacking the criminal, for, even if he succeeded in bearing him to the ground and overcoming him, his companions had already rallied to his help and would quickly dispatch him and the driver.

Jim and Tom listened for sounds of the conflict, and the fact that they heard no shouts or more reports of fire-arms did not lessen their belief that it was all over with Lenman and Durrell.

The boys were still picking their way through the lonely woods when they found their feet sinking in the spongy earth and were stopped by a morass which grew worse at every step.

"It won't do to go any farther over this road," said Wagstaff, who was a few steps in advance, "for the water is getting deeper and I don't believe there are any boats for us to use."

The obvious course was to turn back and make an abrupt change in their route. This was done and they soon were walking over the dry leaves.

"Tom," whispered his companion, who was still a few feet behind him, "somebody is following us."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Wagstaff, stopping short and looking around in the gloom; "are you sure of that?"

"Listen!"

Both were silent. There certainly was a rustling of the leaves behind them, which could not have been made by the wind, for hardly a breath of air stirred the branches. The violent disturbance that had so alarmed them when riding in

the coach had entirely subsided and was succeeded by a calm that gave no sign of the flurry.

"It's one of them robbers," was the frightened reply of Tom, "and he's after us sure enough."

"You're right; what shall we do?"

"How would it work to climb a tree?"

"What good would *that* do?" was the sensible question of Jim.

"He wouldn't know where we were, and by and by would give up the hunt."

"That won't work. Why, Tom, I forgot; we've got our guns and they're loaded; why not use *them*?"

"That's so. I didn't think of that, but we must look out that he don't get in the first shot, I'll tell you what we'll do," added Tom, stepping so close to his friend that his mouth almost touched his ear; "you walk around back of him, so as to place him between us; then we'll come toward each other and the first one that gets sight of him will drop him."

Jim was not over pleased with the plan, since it looked to him as if his task was to be the most dangerous, but he could not well refuse. He therefore faced the other way, and began advancing with the utmost care, making a circuit to the right so as to be certain of not running against the dreaded individual.

In fact, the young man made a larger circuit than was necessary, but he kept his bearings, so that when he once more approached Tom it was in a direct line and the stranger was between them.

McGovern held his rifle tightly grasped, ready to raise and fire the moment he caught sight of their enemy. While there was a little light here and there among the trees, it gave neither him nor his companion any help. It was so early in the autumn that few leaves had fallen, and, had he not used extreme care, literally feeling every step of his way, he would have been injured by the projecting limbs and the numerous trunks of the trees.

While it may be supposed that the strategy of the young men had placed their foe at great disadvantage, they found themselves hindered by the impossibility of giving or receiving any mutual signals. Since the stranger was closer to both than Tom and Jim were to each other, any attempt to send word over his head was certain to be caught and understood by him. All that could be done, therefore, by the young men was to follow the lines hastily marked out before they separated.

Jim having approached his friend as far as was prudent, stopped to decide what to do next. The boys were not thoughtless enough to lose sight of the danger to themselves in carrying out their plan. Since they were coming together each was liable to mistake the other for an enemy. They had not thought of this at first, but both remembered it now, and each decided not to fire at any person who might come into view until first challenging him.

In no other way could a fatal mistake be guarded against, and when, therefore, Jim had stood motionless a minute or two, and was sure he heard the same rustling in front, he simply brought his gun to his shoulder.

"Tom, is that you?" he asked, in a subdued voice that could not fail to reach the stranger.

The noise ceased, but there was no answer. The youth now slightly raised his voice:

"If you don't speak I'll fire! I see you and won't miss."

The stillness continued unbroken, and the stranger did not stir. It was impossible in the darkness to make him out clearly, but sufficient could be seen to insure the success of a shot at so short a range.

"I'm going to fire, look out! *One--two--three!*"

Mr. McGovern ought to have reflected that no man, especially one trained in wrong-doing, would stand up in this fashion and wait for another to perforate him; but at the utterance of the last word Jim let fly straight at the figure, and what is more, he struck it.

The hair of the youth seemed to lift his hat from his head, as a strange cry broke the stillness, and he heard the body, after a single spasmodic leap, fall on the leaves, where, after a few struggles, it lay still.

"Have you killed him?" called the horrified Tom, hurrying from his station a few rods away.

"I've killed *something*" was Jim's reply, who, drawing his pocket safe, struck a match and held it over his head, while both stooped over and examined the trophy of their skill and strategy.

"Jim," said Tom, the next moment, "I'll agree never to say anything about this, for I'm in it as bad as you."

"It's a bargain," was the reply of the other; "we'll never tell Bob, even, for he would plague us to death."

The object before them was a six months' old calf. It had probably become lost in the woods, and, hearing persons walking, followed them with a dim idea that they were friends and would take care of it. The result was a sad example of misplaced confidence.

Certain now that nothing was to be feared from the rogues that must have disposed of Lenman and Durrell long before, the youths resumed their progress through the wood with the same aimless effort that had marked their journey from the first.

It was not long after their incident with the calf that both noticed that they had entered what seemed to be a valley of slight descent. The sound of running water warned them to be careful of their steps, though it was evident the stream was small.

Wagstaff still kept his place slightly in advance, and was picking his way with the same care he had shown from the first, when he stopped short once more.

"What is it?" asked his companion, stepping to his elbow.

"What the mischief can that be?" asked Tom, in reply.

Although Jim could not see the extended arm, he knew his friend was pointing at something which was now observed by him, and whose appearance mystified him beyond expression.

"It must be a ghost," he whispered; "I can't make it out!"

"Don't stir; wait and see; gracious, it's moving!"

CHAPTER XIV--HOST AND GUESTS

Tom Wagstaff and Jim McGovern might well be puzzled at the sight which greeted them while picking their way through the wood.

A strong light seemed to be shining through a screen. At first it was stationary, its appearance preventing them from guessing its nature. While they stood silent, wondering and frightened, on the point of retreating, the shadow of a person glided in front of the light. It was grotesque and gigantic, and flitted across their field of vision, disappearing as quickly as it had come to view. The next moment some one was seen holding a lamp in his hand and peering out in the gloom.

Then the whole explanation broke upon them. They had come upon a tent in the wood, the light shining through the canvas and producing the effect which first puzzled them. The person inside passed between them and the lamp, so that his shadow was flung on the screen in front. Then he picked up the light, and pushing aside the flap, peered out in the gloom.

As he did so the glare from the lamp fell upon his face and showed his features so distinctly that both boys recognized him, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment and delight.

"Bob Budd, as I live! Why, you're the very fellow we're looking for!" called out Tom Wagstaff, as he and his companion hurried forward and greeted their friend, whose amazement was equal to theirs when he held the light above his head and recognized them.

"Where under the sun did you come from?" he asked, all three walking into the tent after shaking hands, and seating themselves, while the host set the light on a small stand at one side.

"I didn't expect you for a week or two," added Bob, whose pleasure could not be concealed.

"Well," replied Jim, with a laugh, "we set out to surprise you, and I guess we succeeded."

"There's no doubt of that," said Bob; "but tell me how you found the way to this spot."

The visitors were not quite willing to give the whole truth, and Tom ventured the explanation.

"We came most of the way in the cars," said he, "but got off at a little station a few miles out to tramp across the country, thinking we might pick up some game on the way. We didn't make out very well, and rode to Black Bear Swamp in the stage. There we got out again and set out to find you."

"How did you know where to look?"

"The driver told us you had a camp out this way somewhere, and we thought we might stumble over it."

This narrative was so brief in the way of details that the boys ran some risk of having it overturned when the account of the driver and his passenger should be heard, but fortunately for them, Durrell and Lenman forebore any references to the unworthy part played by the youths, and Bob Budd remained ignorant of the real cause of the abrupt flight of his friends, and their taking to the shelter of Black Bear Swamp.

"I've had the tent up for three days," added the host, who was about the age of his guests, "and it's so well stored with eatables and drinkables that I come out every night to take a look at it, so as to make sure no tramps or thieves are prowling around. I was about to go home when you hailed me. Shall we go to the house or stay here till morning?"

"I don't see that this can be improved on," replied Tom, looking admiringly about him; "we're pretty well tuckered out, and I would as lief stay here till morning anyway."

"Those are my sentiments," added Jim, much pleased with the survey.

"Then we'll stay," said Bob; "I'm glad you're suited. Where are your trunks?"

"At the station at Piketon."

"I'll send the checks over in the morning and have our man bring them here. I have my own gun and some things to bring from the house, and then we'll be in shape for a good old time in the woods. I guess, boys, a little refreshment won't hurt us."

The liberality of Bob Budd's Uncle Jim and Aunt Ruth, with whom he lived (he having no parents or other near relatives), enabled him to do about as he pleased, so far as his own pleasure and self-indulgence were concerned. He

quickly set a substantial lunch before his guests, of which all partook. I am sorry to say that strong drink formed a large part of the repast, all indulging liberally, after which pipes and cigarettes were produced, and they discussed their plans of enjoyment.

Wagstaff and McGovern did not hesitate to admit that they had run away from home for the purpose of having this outing. The fact that their parents were sure to be distressed over their absence was a theme for jest instead of regret.

"They'll learn to appreciate us when we go back," said Wagstaff, with a laugh, as he puffed his villainous decoction of tobacco and poison; "you see, if Jim and I went home now they would be apt to scold; but they will be so glad at the end of a fortnight that they'll kill the fatted calf and make us welcome."

"A good idea," commented Bob, passing back the flask to McGovern; "you see, my uncle and aunt love me so dearly that they don't object to anything I do, though now and then Aunt Ruth holds up Dick Halliard as a model for me."

"We saw that lovely young man while we were in the stage," remarked Wagstaff; "he went by us on his bicycle."

"Yes; he rides a wheel well, but it makes me mad to see him."

"Why so?"

"Well, he's younger than me, and I used to go to school with him; he's one of those fellows who don't like many things a wide-awake chap like me does, and he has a way of telling you of it to your face."

"That's better than doing it behind your back," suggested Jim.

"He has no right to do it *at all*; what business is it of his if I choose to smoke, take a drink now and then, and lay out the other boys when they get impudent?"

"It's nothing to him, of course; we'll settle his hash for him before we go back. I shouldn't wonder," added Tom, with a wink, "if he should find that bicycle of his missing some day."

"That would hit him harder than anything else," remarked Bob, pleased with the remark; "I've thought of the same thing, but haven't had a good chance to spoil it. I say, boys, we'll have just the jolliest times you ever heard of."

"It won't be *our* fault if we don't," assented Jim, while his companion nodded his head as an indorsement of the same views.

"Is there good hunting in these parts?"

"It, isn't as good as up among the Adirondacks or out West in the Rocky Mountains, but I think we can scare up some sport. I've a good hunting dog, and as soon as we get things in shape we'll see what we can do. What sort of game do you prefer?"

"Anything will suit me--elephants, tigers, rhinoceroses, and the like; or, if we can't do better, I wouldn't mind a bear or deer."

"I daresn't promise much, but we'll have the fun anyway, and that's what we all want more than anything else."

The boys kept up their conversation until the night was well along, and all were in high spirits over the prospect. They smoked and drank until, when they lay down in slumber, they were in that plight that they did not waken till the sun was high in the heavens.

The day was so cloudy and overcast that, although it cleared up before noon, they decided to defer their hunting excursion until the following morning, or perhaps the one succeeding that. Tom and Jim accompanied Bob to his uncle's, where they were made welcome by his relatives, though it must be said that neither was specially pleased with their looks and conduct. They made themselves at home from the first, and their conversation was loud and coarse; but then they were friends of the petted nephew, and *that* was all sufficient.

The trunks were brought from the railway station by Uncle Jim's coachman and taken to the camp of the Piketon Rangers. By that time the news of the attempt to rob the stage had spread, and caused great excitement in the town and neighborhood. Tom and Jim, finding no reference to them in the accounts, deemed it best to say nothing, since they might have found it hard to make it appear that they had acted bravely at a time when such a fine chance was offered to play the hero.

That afternoon the three fully established themselves in the tent of Bob Budd. The day had cleared up beautifully, but it was too late to start out on the great hunt they had fixed their hearts on, and toward night they separated to take a stroll through the surrounding country, with which they wished to become familiar. They believed this could be done better if they should part company, since each would be obliged to keep his senses about him, and to watch his footsteps more closely than if he had a guide in the person of Bob Budd, their friend and host.

CHAPTER XV--THE FOREST PATH

Dick Halliard was kept unusually late at Mr. Hunter's store that evening, for the busy season was approaching, when the merchant was obliged to ask for extra work at the hands of his employees. Dick showed such aptitude at figures that he often gave valuable aid to the bookkeeper, one of the old-fashioned, plodding kind, who found the expanding accounts too much for him to keep well in hand.

Reaching his home, he was met by his mother, who always awaited his coming, no matter how late he might be. A light never failed to be shining from the window for the only son, and a warm welcome and a delicious meal were sure to greet him.

After kissing his mother and taking his seat at the table, he glanced around and asked: "Did father become tired of sitting up for me?"

"He retired some time ago; he wished to wait, but I advised him not to do so."

The lad paused in his meal, and looking at his mother, who was trying to hide her agitation, asked:

"Why do you try to keep anything from me? Father is worse, as I can see from your face."

"Yes," replied the mother, the tears filling her eyes; "he is not as well to-night as usual."

Dick shoved back his chair.

"I will go for Dr. Armstrong; it's too bad that he could not have been called long ago."

"I would have gone, but I feared to leave him alone, and we were expecting you every minute. You must eat something and swallow a cup of tea."

Poor Dick's vigorous appetite was gone, but partly to please his parent, and partly because he knew it was best, he ate and drank a little. Then he ran up-stairs to see his father, who was suffering from a fevered condition which made him slightly delirious. The brave boy spoke a few cheerful words, and then, promising to return as soon as he could, hastened down-stairs and donned his hat and coat.

"You can go quite fast on your bicycle, Dick," said the mother, "and you know we shall count the minutes till the doctor comes."

"You can depend on me to do my best; I will take my bicycle, though it isn't very far."

He had kissed her good-night, and was out-of-doors. The machine had been left just within the gate, where he always leaned it against the trunk of a short, thick cedar. He advanced to take it, as he had done so many times, but to his dismay it was gone.

The door had closed behind him before he had made the discovery, so that his mother knew nothing of his loss.

Dick was dumbfounded. Nothing of the kind had ever befallen him before. He had been in the house less than fifteen minutes, yet during that interval his property had vanished.

"Some one must have followed me," was his conclusion, "and while I was in the house stole my bicycle."

Had the circumstances been different, he would have set a most vigorous investigation on foot, for he prized the wheel above all his possessions; but, with his sick parent up-stairs, the minutes were too precious to be spent in looking after anything else.

"I'll find out who took that," he muttered, as he passed through the gate to the highway, "and when I do, he'll have to settle with me."

He studied the ground closely in the hope of discovering the trail, as it may be called, of his machine, but the light of the moon was too faint to show any signs, unless in the middle of the highway, and if the thief had followed that direction, he took care to keep at the side of the road, where there was a hard path over which he could readily travel.

It was three-fourths of a mile to the home of Dr. Armstrong, who was one of those hard-worked humanitarians--a country physician--subject to call at all hours of the day and night, with many of them requiring a journey of several miles during the worst seasons of the year.

Dick was fortunate in not only finding him at home, but in his office. He had received a summons to a point beyond Mr. Halliard's, and was in the act of mounting his horse to ride thither. Since he had to pass the house of Dick on his way,

he promised to go at once, so that not a minute would be lost.

The brief interview with the physician was satisfactory in the highest degree to the youth, for the medical man explained that, singular as it might seem, the fever which he described as affecting his parent was a very favorable sign. It showed that the remedies already used were doing the work intended, and there was more ground for hope of his ultimate recovery than before.

With this burden lifted from his heart, the boy's thoughts returned to his bicycle.

"I would give a good deal to know who took it," he murmured, as he set out on his return; "I never knew of such a thing. Why didn't I think of it!" he suddenly asked himself, as he recalled that he had a little rubber match-safe in his pocket.

Bringing it forth, he struck one of the bits of wood, and shading the tiny flames from the slight breeze, stooped over and attentively examined the road and paths at each side.

He discovered nothing to reward his search, and resumed his walk homeward. "The thief must have taken the other road," he concluded, walking more rapidly.

Only a little way farther he came to the big stretch of woods which surrounded the immense reservoir of water behind the dam that was built years before. Dick was familiar with the locality, and knew of a path which left the main highway and entered the woods, breaking into two routes, one of which led to the mill-pond, while the other, if followed, conducted a person to the wooded hilly region beyond.

Upon reaching the point where the path turned off from the highway, Dick again paused and struck a second match. This was for the purpose of studying the ground, for somehow or other he had formed the belief that the thief would take to the woods with the property, until he could find time to dispose of it without attracting attention.

There it was!

The ground, although quite hard, showed the imprint of the large and small wheel distinctly. Upon turning into the wood the change of direction necessarily threw the wheels out of alignment for a short distance, and there could be no mistake about the prints that were left in the earth.

"There's where the thief went!" exclaimed the lad, straightening up and striving to peer into the impenetrable gloom; "but he must have walked and pushed the bicycle, for no one would dare to ride through there in the nighttime. I don't go home till I find out something about the rogue that took it from the front of our house."

It was a source of regret that, in his haste to go to the physician, he forgot the precaution he had resolved to take, whenever he found it necessary to go abroad at night. His father was the owner of a fine revolver that had lain in the house for weeks without being used. If the youth had it with him now, he would have felt double the assurance that was his when he began making his way along the forest path. Nevertheless, his resolution to recover his property was none the less because of his forgetfulness.

CHAPTER XVI--THE PLOTTERS

Dick Halliard had walked only a short distance along the lonely forest path when he made a startling discovery.

While he was stealthily following some one, an unknown party was following him. His own senses were on the alert, and the young hero caught the faint footfalls not far behind him.

"That's more than I bargained for," he muttered, "and now would be a good time to have my pistol; but I haven't got it, so what's the use of thinking about it."

There was comfort in the thought, however, that the stranger who was at his heels was unaware of the fact. Had he wished to approach secretly, he could have stepped so softly that Dick would have heard nothing of him.

But the sensation of being between two fires, and liable to run into both, was so unpleasant that the lad stepped noiselessly from the path and screened himself among the dense shadows, until the one at the rear should pass him.

He had not long to wait when the footsteps were heard opposite, and with the help of a partial ray of moonlight, which reached the path at that point, he was able to discern the outlines of the party.

It was well that he was so familiar with the route, for, had he not been, he must have betrayed himself against the overhanging limbs and bushes, with an occasional depression in the ground, where it was necessary to step with great care.

Had Dick not known the precise point in the dark where a small stream wound its way across, he would have learned from an angry exclamation of the fellow in front, who slipped and fell forward in it. A slightly longer step than usual placed the eavesdropper on the other side, and he continued his guarded pursuit.

The next moment brought a sharp shock to Dick, who suddenly became aware that the footfalls in front had ceased. The fellow had stopped walking, and seemed to be standing still, as if listening. The first warning Dick received after he checked himself was a glimpse of his head and shoulders just in advance.

Fearful of being detected himself, Dick instantly drew back with the noiselessness of an Indian scout, and stood ready to retreat farther or dart aside, as might be necessary.

"*Hulloa there!*"

The call had a gruesome sound in the solemn stillness of the woods, and for a moment Dick was sure he was discovered. He made no answer, and the hail was repeated, but with no more success than before.

He was convinced that the fellow was not certain any one was behind him, but was seeking to verify a suspicion he had formed.

Failing of reply, he was quiet a moment longer, when he emitted a low whistle, like the cry of a night bird.

This, too, had to be repeated, but was more successful than in the former instance, for on the second call a reply came from a point farther on, but not far off. Only a few seconds elapsed when some one was heard approaching, and the couple quickly met in the path, not more than twenty feet from where Dick was standing.

They began talking, but at first he could not catch the words, which were uttered in low tones. He therefore stole a little nearer, and heard them distinctly.

"I suppose you have become pretty well acquainted with the country?" was the remark of Jim McGovern.

"Well, there isn't much to get acquainted with. I went down to the village and took a look around," replied Wagstaff. "I thought I might run against Bob, but he must have taken another route. I had a little lark on my way home."

"What was that?"

"I was passing Dick Halliard's home, when I caught sight of his bicycle leaning against a tree in the front yard, as if it was tired. I thought right away of what Bob told us about that machine, and saw it was the very chance we wanted. It couldn't have been better. No one was around, and I slipped through the gate, drew the bicycle out onto the road, mounted and rode it down to the path, where, of course, I got off and pushed it in front to this place."

"Good!" exclaimed the delighted McGovern; "that couldn't have happened better. Won't Bob be tickled! You are sure no one saw you bring it away?"

"I won't forget how I learned there wasn't any one watching me."

"How was that?"

"After I got out in the road I looked around to make sure. Nobody was in sight, but I turned my head too far, and set the machine to wobbling so bad that before I knew it I was over on my side, and thought my leg was broken."

"A cyclist must become used to taking headers; the wonder is that more people are not killed. Tom, I want you to do me the favor of letting me ruin that machine."

"I don't know that I have any objection."

"Have you fixed on a plan?" asked McGovern.

"I haven't had time to think. How would it do to blow it up with dynamite?"

"Too risky for the rest of us."

"Then we can chop it into splinters and make a fire to cook our game with."

"The trouble there," said McGovern, who seemed to be quite cautious, "is that there is very little if any woodwork about it; it's nearly all metal."

"Let's dig a hole in the ground and bury it."

"That takes too much work; you know we've all sworn off labor for the rest of our lives, and we wouldn't dare hire anybody, for that would be a dead give away."

"I have it; we'll run it into the mill-pond. The water is forty feet deep, and nobody would ever think of looking there for it, and it can be done with no trouble at all."

"That's the idea! It won't take five minutes to put it where it will never be seen again. Where is it?"

"Right up here on the edge of the mill-pond, all ready; it's queer I didn't think of it myself. But since you feel as you do, why, I'm agreeable."

The couple moved along the path, and directly behind them stole Dick Halliard. He had overheard every word that we have recorded, and he was nearly beside himself with anger.

"So you mean to run my bicycle in the mill-pond, do you?" he muttered between his set teeth; "look out if, instead of running it into the water, that you two don't get run in yourselves!"

It was an extensive contract for the single youth to checkmate these fellows, but that was precisely what he had determined to do!

CHAPTER XVII--A BRAVE EXPLOIT

The danger with Dick Halliard was, that his anger was likely to overmaster his judgment, and lead him to attempt something that would cause his own disastrous overthrow.

The knowledge that the young man had just asked the privilege of destroying his bicycle was exasperating to a degree, but he might have reflected that, since the method chosen was by sinking it in the mill-pond, he had only to wait and watch where the submersion took place, when it could be readily recovered without injury.

"I won't stand it," muttered the wrathful lad, stealing after them; "if they undertake that business somebody is going to get hurt."

It was but a short distance to the pond. Dick was walking dangerously near the couple, who were liable at any moment to turn and discover him. He saw the gleam of the water in the faint moonlight, but just before the pond was reached the path divided. While one encircled the extensive sheet of water, the other turned to the left, and led farther into the woods and among the mountainous regions beyond.

It was as this point the pair stopped for a moment and exchanged a few words. The youth who had stolen the bicycle was the first to speak.

"Jim, you're so anxious to drown the wheel, and I'm willing, but there's no need of waiting to see you do it."

"What's your hurry, Tom?"

"I'm anxious to see how Bob made out. I'll turn off the path right here and go to camp; you'll be along in a few minutes, and if everything is right, Bob ought to be there very soon, if he hasn't arrived before this."

The matter was of no moment, and, as his companion took the path leading deeper into the woods, Jim kept on in the direction of the mill-pond, where the bicycle was leaning against a tree near the edge of the water.

This little circumstance, however, encouraged the angry Dick, for he now had but one person to contend with, though the second was near at hand.

Jim, as he had been called, spent several minutes in searching for the bicycle, though he was close to it all the time. This, too, was fortunate, since Tom was walking rapidly away and was likely soon to be beyond call.

"Ah, here it is!" muttered Jim, a moment later, "I thought Tom was fooling me, but I'll soon fix it now."

He took hold of the wheel, and as it assumed the perpendicular, began shoving it toward the water. The path was so narrow that some difficulty was caused, and Dick heard him muttering angrily to himself again.

"I guess you had better drop that!"

Dick uttered the words in the most guttural bass he could assume, and they were startling enough in the gloomy stillness of the place.

Jim was on the very edge of the pond at the moment, balancing the bicycle, and about to shove it out into the deep water at his feet, where it would instantly drop from sight. The hiss of a serpent beneath his feet could not have given him a greater shock.

He turned so abruptly that the machine fell over on its side with the rim touching the pond, which just there was at its deepest. Seeing a figure advancing from the darkness, he recoiled a step and faced the intruder.

In his fright he stepped a few inches too far and fell backward with a loud splash.

"It would serve you right if you were half drowned," said Dick, moving forward to pick up his wheel.

He had it erect in a twinkling, and started to push it along the path, when the terrified Jim shouted:

"Help! help! I can't swim! I'm drowning!"

This put a new and serious face on the business. Dick let his bicycle tumble sideways again and ran to the edge of the pond to give help to the unfortunate youth.

As has been stated the water at this part of the mill-pond was deeper than anywhere else. The instant Jim went off the land, he was where a twenty-foot pole would not have reached bottom. Furthermore, he told the truth when he called that he could not swim. He was unable to sustain himself for a single stroke.

Quick as was Dick Halliard in dashing over the brief intervening space, he saw the head of the fellow disappear under the surface, the disturbed waters bubbling over him.

But he knew he would come up again, and hurriedly looked around for a pole or stick to extend to him. None was within reach and the seconds were of too momentous value to allow him a further hunt.

Knowing the endangered youth was in a panic, Dick now strove to reach him without leaving the land. Remembering where he had gone down, he essayed to step as far out from the edge as he could, in the hope that he might give him his hand.

But, familiar as he was with the big mill-pond and its surroundings, he forgot that the shore at that place went downward as sheer as the side of a stone wall.

As a consequence, the instant he bore the least weight on the extended foot, down he went with a force that carried him below the surface.

But Dick was one of the most skillful of swimmers, and though the water was chilly, he came up like a duck.

He was so prompt in doing this that he and Jim rose simultaneously, and within arm's length of each other.

"Keep still! don't move, and I'll take you ashore!"

He might as well have appealed to the whirlwind. The instant he grasped the hair of the big fellow the latter turned and flung both arms about his neck, and despite all his rescuer could do the two disappeared again.

The young rescuer knew that unless the desperate lock was broken both must drown, and the coolness with which he decided on the right and only thing to do and did it, was one of the most striking exhibitions our hero ever gave, or, for that matter, that any one could have given.

While holding his breath below, the death-lock of the drowning youth was slightly relaxed, but not sufficiently for his hold to be released. Our body is slightly less in specific gravity than water, and, aided by the exertions of Dick, the two quickly rose to the surface again.

The crisis came the instant they readied fresh air. It was then the drowning Jim would strive fiercely to gather his rescuer closer to him, and nothing less than the power of Hercules could shake him off. Dick knew it and acted accordingly.

At the moment he gasped for breath he let drive with his right fist, landing directly between Jim's eyes. It was the strongest blow Dick could deliver, and like a flash he repeated it.

It did the business. Poor Jim was in a dazed condition already. The two blows of Dick stunned him and he became a dead weight on his rescuer.

Fortunately for the latter they were close to shore, else his attempt to save the other might have resulted most seriously to himself. The larger boy was likely to recover from the stunning blow in a few seconds, and the instant he did so would become frantic again, while Dick's strength must speedily succumb.

The cry of the drowning youth rang through the wood and reached the ears of Tom Wagstaff, who dashed back to learn what it meant. At the moment he arrived Dick had reached one hand up on the planking which ran along the edge of the pond, and, with his other arm under the shoulders of Jim, kept his head in the air, but was unable to help him further until he should recover his senses.

Dick knew who the second party was that suddenly appeared on the margin.

"He's all right," he said, alluding to Jim; "reach down and give him your hand; he's coming to."

The hand grasped by Tom was limp at first, but it suddenly gripped the other with desperate force, and putting forth all his power, Tom gave a pull which dragged out the half-drowned Jim, and stretched him on his face, where he showed signs of speedily recovering his bewildered senses.

"How did this happen?" asked the puzzled Tom, looking at Dick as he emerged from the water.

"He was about to push my bicycle that you stole into the pond, when he fell in himself; he called out that he couldn't swim, so I jumped in after him; and now, if you have no objection, I'll take my wheel home."

As he spoke he advanced to where the bicycle was lying, stood it up, and moved down the path.

And as for Jim and Tom they spoke never a word.

CHAPTER XVIII--AN ACT OF FORGETFULNESS

It would be supposed that common gratitude would have filled the heart of Jim McGovern after his rescue from death by the very lad whom he had sought to injure, but when he returned to the tent, changed his draggled garments, helped himself to strong spirits and began puffing a cigarette, he was angered at seeing the smile on the face of his companion.

"What's the matter with you?" he growled.

"Nothing, only I think you and I ought to learn how to swim."

"I don't see any need of it," replied Jim, who was in a savage humor.

"Then you won't have to yell for Dick Halliard to help you out when you tumble into the mill-pond."

"He didn't help me out; what are you talking about?" "He said so, and you didn't deny it."

"It was *me* that helped *him* out," was the unblushing response of young McGovern, growing angrier every minute; "and I'm going to get even with him."

"Get even for what? For helping him out?"

"For lying about me; I don't allow any chap to do that."

"How are you going to do it, Jim?" asked Tom, glad of a chance to tantalize his companion.

"Why, how do you suppose? I'll lay for him."

"Ah, that reminds me!" said his companion; "I forgot it until this minute."

"What's that?"

"Why, when Bob started out this evening, he said he was going to do that very thing--lay for young Halliard."

"What's *he* got against him?" demanded Jim, resenting the idea that any one should rob him of his anticipated pleasure.

"You heard what he said last night; Halliard holds himself so much better than he that he feels it his duty to bring him down a peg or two; he told me that while you and I took a stroll wherever we chose, he would go down to Picketon to get some things at the store and before he came back would fix Halliard."

"I wonder if he did it before Halliard pulled me out of the pond--I mean before I pulled him out."

"If he did, it couldn't have amounted to much, for he didn't act like a chap suffering harm. No, it must be that Bob has missed him; but he's likely to catch him on the way back. It's so late that Bob must be coming home, and he'll be sure to meet the young gentleman and will give him a laying-out that he will remember for years."

Jim smoked a few minutes in silence. It is a principle of human nature that if we do another a kindness we are apt to feel more friendly disposed toward him than before, while the one receiving the favor is inclined to resent it. His gratitude may overmaster this mean emotion, but there is something in the thought of being under obligations to another which is unpleasant, and results in stirring up emotions that are no credit to us.

Jim McGovern could not forget that he was trying to injure an innocent person when that person saved him from drowning. Had he not been thus engaged, probably he might not have felt so ugly toward him. But his situation was so humiliating, considered in all aspects, that he looked upon Dick Halliard with more dislike than upon his bitterest enemy.

"Tom," said he, rising to his feet and flinging away the remnant of a cigarette, "I aint going to stand it."

"You are standing it this minute after sitting all the evening."

"Stop trying to be funny; I'm going after that Halliard."

"When--to-morrow?"

"No, to-night; right away."

"Nonsense, it is very late; wait until to-morrow."

"I can't do it; I'm mad clear through; I'm off!"

He started toward the opening, but Tom sprang up and caught his arm.

"If you are bent on going take your weapons with you. There's no telling how badly you'll need 'em."

"No; I don't intend to shoot anybody, but I mean to give that fellow the biggest whipping of his life."

"How are you going to manage it?"

"I can't stop to explain. I'll tell you when I come back;" and, without saying anything more, the wrathful Ranger strode toward the mill-pond, where he took the main path leading to the highway. As he saw the gleam of the water he shuddered to recall how near he came to death; but his evil nature had no room at that time for the sweet, tender emotions that should have filled him.

At the moment of leaving camp he had fixed upon no clear method of procedure, and he gave his meditations now to the best plan for punishing his preserver.

"It's easy enough," he added, after walking a short way; "I'll go to the door and knock, and if it isn't young Halliard that opens it, I'll ask for him, saying I must see him on something important. Then, when I get him outside, I'll jump on him. I can do him up before anybody comes to his help. If he's the first one to show himself, it'll be all the better."

Bob had pointed out the modest little home of Dick Halliard that day, while the three Picketon Rangers were returning from their call at their leader's house. Consequently McGovern had no trouble in finding the place. He was surprised to observe the twinkle of a light from an upper window, which he accepted as proof that Dick was in the act of retiring.

I wonder whether, if he had known it was the light burning in the sick chamber of his preserver's parent, it would have restrained him from pushing on with his scheme of revenge. I fear not.

Standing in front of the gate the Ranger spent several minutes in making what might be called a reconnoissance.

So far as he could discover everything was silent and no one was astir. It was the only house in sight, and the lamp, showing through the curtain, was the solitary sign of wakefulness in Dick Halliard's home. No shadows passed in front of the light, and he wondered why it was that all was so strangely quiet.

But the impressiveness of the hour did not deter the evil youth from carrying out his purpose. He softly opened the gate and moved as stealthily as a burglar along the short path leading to the front door.

Here he paused a few seconds to make sure his plan would work perfectly.

"When he shows himself, I'll step back and ask him to come outside, as I don't want any one to hear me. I'll get him to shut the door and leave the porch; then when I've got him where I want him, I'll let him have a half-dozen right and left-handers, and run as hard I can down the road. Nobody round here knows me and he won't get a good look at my face. If he does and makes a kick over it, I'll prove an alibi."

Nothing seemed amiss, and the expectant McGovern reached up his hand to sound the old-fashioned knocker.

"More than likely it will be young Halliard himself that will come to the door--gracious! I never thought of that!"

At that moment Bowser, the big bull-dog belonging to Dick Halliard, having heard a slight noise in front, came trotting around the corner of the house to see whether there were any tramps for him to devour.

Had Jim kept his place he would not have been molested, for Bowser was too well trained to harm any one calling in the right way, and whose appearance was not against him. But the instant the youth caught sight of the ferocious canine, he did the very worst thing possible--he started to run.

Bowser accepted this as proof that he was there on wrong business, and he dashed after him like a runaway engine. Before Jim could open and pass through the gate, the dog was nipping at the calves of his legs with a vigor that compelled the terrified youth to yell at the top of his voice.

Dick Halliard heard the shout, and, springing from his bed, threw up the window and called to the animal to forbear. Bowser disliked to obey, for he was just getting fairly at work; but he came trotting back with his head down and a reproachful glance at his young master, for having interfered at such an unlucky time for him.

Inasmuch as it is impossible to do justice to Jim McGovern's feelings, while making his way back to the tent in the woods, we will not attempt to do so. Silence is the more eloquent under such circumstances.

CHAPTER XIX--AN ERROR OF JUDGMENT

Had Jim McGovern taken another course when starting out on the war-path, he would not have met such overwhelming disaster, for he would have encountered Bob Budd returning from an experience hardly less stirring than his own; but the two followed different routes and did not see each other until they met in camp, after both had been through their experience and the night was well advanced.

Reaching the highway, Dick mounted his bicycle and continued his journey homeward at an easy pace. There was a faint moon in the sky, and now and then the wind blew fitfully among the tree branches, but he was in good spirits. The words of the physician concerning his father encouraged him greatly, and he was happy over the unexpected manner in which he had recovered his bicycle. Mr. Hunter had notified him that day, that, on the first of the following month, his wages would be increased, and that so long as he showed the same devotion to his interests, he might count upon a yearly repetition of the favor.

"I'm luckier than I deserve," he reflected, as he skimmed over the highway, "for I was able to attend school until I graduated, and Mr. Hunter, who was one of the trustees, told me that afternoon that he had had his eye on me for several years and wanted me. Well, I have tried to do as father and mother taught me when I was a little fellow, and I've no doubt that that's the reason for it all. I can't understand how any one can show the meanness of Bob Budd and those boys he has with him. There was no earthly excuse for stealing my bicycle--Hello! there's some one in the road yonder."

He was approaching a clump of trees where the shadows were so thick that he could not see distinctly, but he was certain he observed a figure step back as if to avoid being noticed.

Dick gently applied the brake to his wheel and hesitated whether to go on or not. He recalled that he had heard rumors of robbery and attempts at burglary in the neighborhood within the past week. Indeed, there were signs discovered that very morning that proved an effort had been made to pry open one of the shutters of Mr. Hunter's store; but the marauders were scared off by the dog that was kept on duty every night.

Suppose one of these criminals had located himself alongside the road for the purpose of robbing passers-by!

"He wouldn't get much from *me*" reflected Dick, who had less than a single dollar in change with him, "but, all the same, I don't fancy being stopped by him. He might shoot me because of his disappointment. Maybe he thinks I am like some other clerks, who make a practice of robbing their employers."

By this time the bicycle was hardly moving, the headway being just sufficient to enable him to keep his poise. He peered intently forward, ready to turn and speed down the road on the first sign of danger; but if a person was skulking among the trees, he took good care to keep out of sight, and whether or not Dick was mistaken could be learned only by going forward.

He was thinking fast. If he wished to reach home, where his parents were expecting him, this was the only road, unless he went back to town and made a circuit of eight or ten miles, a proceeding not to be thought of when he was already within a half-mile of his own door.

True, he might adopt another method. He could return until beyond sight of the rogue, whoever he was, leave his bicycle at the roadside, and then cut across lots on foot.

But Dick was a plucky youth, and could not bear the thought of fleeing from danger whose nature he did not understand.

"No, I'll go ahead," he muttered, compressing his lips, as he removed the brake and began gradually increasing his speed. "If he stops me, why, there'll be a fight, that's all!"

His plan was to "put on all steam" and dash through the gloomy space, which was only a few rods in extent. By doing so he counted upon surprising any enemy that might be lurking there and getting beyond his reach before he could interpose.

There was but one difficulty in the way. He had already approached so near the clump of trees that he could not well obtain the necessary speed. But he could try, and try he did.

The muscular legs bore down hard on the pedals, and the big wheel began increasing its swift revolutions, but the pace was hardly one-half what it would have been had he possessed a few more rods in which to set things humming.

Dick Halliard had good cause for his misgivings. There was an individual among the shadow of the trees, waiting, like a spider, for a victim to come within his net.

At the moment of gliding into the shadow the youth saw him. He was standing in the middle of the road, directly in his path.

"Out of the way, or I'll run you down!" shouted Dick, aiming apparently at him, but making a sharp turn to the left.

"Try it, if you dare!" called the stranger in a gruff voice.

"What do you want?" demanded Dick, bending all his efforts to the task of flanking the fellow.

"I want *you!*" was the startling reply; "get down off of that wheel before I fetch you down!"

Whoever the fellow was he kept in Dick's path so persistently, that despite all he could do he could not prevent a collision. The bicycle fell with a resounding bang on its side, and the rider was compelled to make a dexterous leap to save himself from going down with it.

One of the most noticeable traits about the sinewy Dick was his quickness of resource and presence of mind. While he suspected the identity of the party who had thus stopped him, he was in doubt until the last words were spoken. Then the young man in his excitement forgot to disguise his tones. It was Bob Budd, who had taken this occasion to carry out the threat he had made so often in the presence of others.

Dick could not believe the bully meant to use any weapon, but intended simply to chastise him. He meant to give the boy an unmerciful beating.

It was this certainty that inspired Dick to assail him with all the energy at his command.

The instant he was freed from his wheel, and, without uttering the first word of warning, Dick let fly with both fists, in such sharp and quick succession that the dazed bully went over on his back, as if smitten by the hoof of a mule.

"I know you, Bob Budd!" said the younger youth, whose anger was at a high point, "and you have been threatening me a long time; now we'll settle the business for good."

"I aint Bob Budd, either," replied that worthy, climbing to his feet. Then seeing the absurdity of the situation, he added, desperately:

"Yes, I am Bob Budd, and I have a big account to square with you."

"This is the time," said Dick, who, impatient at his slowness, started to assail him the moment he got on his feet.

"Hold on," protested Bob, "can't you wait till a fellow is up? Why don't you fight fair?"

"I'm holding on," returned Dick, edging round into the moonlight where he could observe every movement of his antagonist; "but I'm tired of waiting for you."

"I'm coming; you needn't worry."

But the vigorous reception of the younger lad had taught the bully to be careful. While he was as confident as the other Piketon Ranger of his ability to "do him up," he saw the need of going about it carefully. He threw out his arms in the most approved style, and, as Dick slowly retreated a few steps, followed under the belief that he was becoming timid and that the blows struck a moment before were of a chance nature.

But the younger now had the elder in the moonlight, where he could see every movement distinctly. He bounded at Bob again with such fierce quickness that the big fellow was once more prostrate ere he could strike or parry a blow.

"I guess that's enough," said Dick, "but if you are not satisfied I'll wait."

"I'm not through with you yet," replied Bob, who was now in a white heat of anger; so much so indeed that he hastily drew the loaded revolver that he carried at all times. He had lost his self-command and was determined to punish Dick Halliard, who had turned the tables upon him with such vengeance.

CHAPTER XX--THE BAYING OF A HOUND

Dick Halliard caught the gleam of the pistol in the hands of the enraged Bob Budd, but before he could bring it into play the younger lifted up his bicycle, ran it swiftly a few paces, sprang up behind, and set his legs to work with desperate energy.

As he did so he remembered he was still in danger. He leaned as far ahead as he could, like a frontier scout trying to avoid the shots of a party of Indians. It was well he took the precaution, for Bob was so beside himself with wrath that he deliberately pointed the weapon at the fast-disappearing fugitive, and let fly with three chambers as fast as he could discharge them. It was not his fault that the bullets sped wide of the mark, for he tried hard to hit the lad that had handled him so roughly.

Dick glanced over his shoulder, and as he caught sight of the dim figure in the moonlight he said, with a smile:

"Bob wouldn't have used his pistol if he wasn't beside himself with rage; any way, I think he and the rest of them will let me alone after this."

Bob Budd stood a full minute after the bicyclist vanished in the gloom. By that time his anger gave way to a feeling of alarm, as he reflected on what he had done, or rather tried to do.

He had stopped Dick Halliard on the highway; he had attacked him without cause, and when he was fleeing had discharged his pistol at him, doing so with the intention of hitting him with each cartridge. If Dick chose to prosecute him, what could keep him out of State prison?

The thought was a startling one, and did not contribute to the Ranger's comfort as he picked his way homeward, where, after a time, he was joined by Jim McGovern, returning from his equally marked failure to "even up" matters with Dick Halliard.

You may be certain that neither Bob nor Jim had anything truthful to tell about their meeting with the young man. McGovern stated that he lost his way, and, finding the hour was so late, decided to put off his revenge until a more favorable time. He took care to keep the marks of Bowser's teeth from the sight of the others, and he was therefore vexed by no annoying questions.

Bob explained that he had been looking for Dick Halliard, and wondered that he did not meet him. The news given by his brother Rangers showed that the doomed youth was elsewhere that evening, which, the bully added, was mighty lucky for him.

When Wagstaff commented on the bruised appearance of Bob's face, he replied that he ran against the trunk of a tree in the woods, and then he hastened to change the conversation.

"To-morrow we shall have our hunt, boys," he said, with glowing face, "and here's success to it!"

The others eagerly joined in the toast, for the reason that they never refused to join in any toast presented.

"You think we're going to have good weather?" remarked Tom.

"There's no doubt of it. I asked old Swipes, Carter, and the prophets, and they all agree that the weather will be prime for several days to come."

"If that's to be the case, the best thing for us to do is to sleep while we can, so as to be up early in the morning."

The suggestion was so eminently wise that it was adopted without further delay.

The following morning was one after a hunter's own heart. The air was crisp and cool, but not sufficiently so to be chilly, nor was it mild enough to render oppressive the slight exertion of walking.

It was too early in the autumn for many of the leaves to fall from the trees, so that in most places a hunter could see but a short distance in advance when picking his way through the woods.

The Piketon Rangers were not accustomed to rise with the sun, and having retired quite late the preceding night, did not rouse themselves as early as was their intention. But their minds were so fixed on the expected enjoyment of the hunt that they willingly put forth the extra exertion needed.

They were in high spirits, for everything was promising, and the bracing air produced its effect upon them.

"I don't think there will be any need of our pistols," remarked Wagstaff, doubtfully, when they were ready to start.

"I generally carry mine at all times," replied Bob Budd, "but we have got to do some mountain climbing, and will be likely to find them in the way. I guess we had better leave them."

This settled the question, and the three smaller weapons were hidden within the tent, in a hollow which Bob's ingenuity had fashioned, and where the valuables were not likely to be found by any prowlers in the neighborhood.

The rifles which Jim and Tom had brought from home were left at Bob's house, and he furnished each with a double-barreled shot gun, as the kind of weapon most likely to be needed, though it seemed to the city youths that the others were just what was wanted in the event of meeting bears or deer. They had cause to regret their choice sooner than they anticipated.

Not the least enthusiastic member of the party was Bob Budd's hound Hero, that had all a trained animal's enjoyment of the hunt, and who received so few chances of taking part in the sport that his appetite was at the keenest point.

He darted ahead of the campers, running at his highest speed for a half-mile in sheer wantonness of spirits, then darting off at right angles, and finally trotting back to his friends, as if wondering why they did not make greater haste.

Several times his baying roused the belief on the part of Jim and Tom that he had struck the trail of some animal, but Bob, who had been out with him before, shook his head.

"He lets out a peculiar cry when he takes the scent; I'll know it the minute I hear it."

"But what makes him yelp *now*, when there isn't any game?" asked Jim.

"Because he can't help it, just as we sing and shout when we feel happy and merry."

"There he goes! *That* means something!" exclaimed Tom, coming to an abrupt halt to listen to the baying of the hound, a considerable distance ahead.

But Bob again shook his head.

"Wild animals aint so plenty that they can be scared up as quick as all that; we must get further up the mountain before we can look for anything worth shooting."

When Bob was a small boy he had accompanied his uncle on several hunting expeditions in this part of the world, and he held a bright recollection of the occasion.

Many years before deer and bears had been plentiful, and he remembered that his uncle described how the hunt for a deer should be managed among the mountainous section to the rear of their camp.

That knowledge promised to be of great help to Bob, now that, after the lapse of so long a time, he had started to hunt over the same ground.

The course of the party was steadily ascending, and since there were many rocks and considerable tangled undergrowth in their way, it was not long before they felt the result of the unusual exertion.

"Great Caesar!" exclaimed Tom Wagstaff, dropping down on a log and panting hard; "this is like a good many other things which don't give half as much fun as we expect. Bob, where's that flask?"

The others were also glad to sit down for a brief rest, and Bob lost no time in producing the required article, which was applied to the lips of each in turn with the bottom pointed toward the sky, and a part of the fiery contents gurgled down their throats.

"Of course it's tiresome, because it's all the way up up-hill," said Bob, who took off his hat and fanned his flushed face; "but we'll soon get as high as we want to go, and then it'll be plain sailing."

"It's easy enough to come down-hill, provided it aint too steep."

"If it gets that way, all a fellow has to do is to lie down and roll," said Bob; "but I'm hopeful that Hero will start some animal before we go much further."

The three listened, but though the hound was absent nothing was heard from him. He evidently was making a "still hunt," but the moment he struck a scent he was sure to let the young hunters know.

Whether or not they did their part, there could be no doubt that the canine would perform his in a creditable manner, for he had been trained by competent hands that fully understood how to teach so sagacious an animal.

Having rested themselves, the party pushed up the mountain-side, until they reached a sort of plateau or table-land, beyond which it was not necessary to climb further.

By this time the three were pretty well tired out again, and once more an appeal was made to the stuff in the flask, without which the hunters felt they could not get along.

Then they indulged in several cigarettes apiece, that and the drink of alcohol being the worst preparation possible for

the sport in which they were engaged.

"Now," said Bob Budd, "we have only to wait here until Hero starts the game for us."

"Will it come up in front of us to be shot?" was the natural inquiry of Tom Wagstaff.

"I shouldn't have said that 'we' are to wait here, but one of us," Bob hastened to explain. "You've noticed that we have been following a path all the way to this point. Well, it keeps on over the mountain and down the other side."

"Who made the path?"

"It is a hundred years old, if not older, and was made by wild animals that came down the mountain to drink from the stream that makes the mill-pond near our camp. The path branches off into three forks a quarter of a mile up the mountain, each of the three having been used by deer, bears, and other wild beasts that used to be so plentiful in these parts."

"Where are the other paths?"

"This is the middle one; about two hundred yards to the left is the second, and not quite so far to the right is the third; now, if Hero starts any game he is sure to take one of these paths in his flight."

"But suppose the animal is on the other side of Hero," said Jim, "that is to say, suppose the dog is between us and him?"

"Then he will run the other way, but there's where Hero will show his training. He knows as much about hunting as we do."

If Bob had said that the canine knew a great deal more he would have told the truth.

"If Hero should strike the scent of a deer or bear he would know in a minute whether he was closer to us than the game, and if the dog was the closer, he would not bay until he had circled around and got on the other side, for he knows that if he didn't do so the beast would run *away* instead of *toward* us, and his business is to drive him down within our reach."

Tom and Jim were filled with admiration of the brute, whose knowledge of sporting matters was so extensive.

"I had no idea a pup could be trained to such a fine point," remarked Jim, "but I suppose it is the nature of the beast."

"When I was a sweet, innocent little boy," said Bob, disposed to be facetious, "I came up here with my father and Uncle Jim to hunt deer. They left me at this spot while father went to the left and Uncle Jim to the right. I was too small to handle a gun, and they told me if I saw anything to yell. Well, a very queer thing happened. A buck and doe were started, and the old fellow came trotting over this path. He never saw me until I let out a yell like a wild-cat, when he wheeled off to one side and dashed through the wood to where father was waiting. He was shot without trouble, and at the same moment Uncle Jim brought down the doe, that took the other path."

"Do you suppose there is any likelihood of Hero starting two to-day?"

"We will be lucky if he starts one, for the animals are very scarce, and hunters have spent several days roaming over the mountains without getting a shot."

"It seems to me that to make sure of our sport we should station ourselves as you did," said Jim; "then if the animal comes down this side of the mountain, he will be sure to take one of the three paths, and Tom or you or I will get a shot at him."

"It will be time enough when we hear Hero," replied Bob, "for he aint likely to start a deer very near us."

The young man's knowledge of the sport was so much superior to that of his companions that they naturally deferred to him in the preliminary arrangements.

"How long ago was it that you had that famous hunt with your father and uncle?" asked Jim McGovern.

Bob reflected a minute, and replied that it was ten years, if not more.

"You can see that I was but a sprig of a youngster, though I was considered unusually smart. If they had given me a gun, and I had had a chance to kneel down and aim over the rocks, I would have brought down that buck, for he couldn't have offered a better target than at the moment I scared him away."

"Do you suppose," asked Tom Wagstaff, "that any deer have been over these paths within the past few weeks or months?"

By way of reply Bob stooped down and brushed away the leaves covering the space of several feet in front, doing it with great care.

"Look!" said he to the others, who kneeled beside him.

There, sure enough, were the imprints of the small, delicate hoofs of a deer, the marks being so distinct that there could be no mistake about their identity.

"But they are under the leaves," said Jim.

"Yes; under the leaves that have fallen this year, but on top of those that fell last fall; you can see how the rotten leaves have been pushed down in the ground by the hoofs."

"Then how long since the deer went by?"

"It is so early in the autumn that few leaves have fallen, so I'm satisfied the game passed within a few days, probably not more than a week ago."

"If *that's* the case," said the gratified Jim, "there is a much better chance than I suspected for us--"

"*Hark!*"

The peculiar cry of the hound at that moment rang out on the autumn air sharp, clear, and distinct.

"He has struck a scent as sure as you're born!" exclaimed Bob.

CHAPTER XXI--"HELP! HELP!"

"Take your stations," added Bob Budd, excitedly; "we're going to have the tallest kind of fun; I'll stay here, and you--" But his friends did not wait for further directions. Tom Wagstaff sprang up, gun in hand, and went threshing among the trees and through the undergrowth toward the path on the left (as they faced the mountain ridge), while Jim McGovern was equally prompt in hurrying to the trail on the right.

Within a few seconds after the first baying of the hound fell upon their ears Bob Budd found himself alone.

"They're such lunkheads," he said to himself, "that the two together don't know enough to hit the side of a barn ten feet off. I hope the deer will take the middle path so that I can show them how the thing is done, which reminds me that it is time to take another drink."

Meanwhile the dog Hero was getting in his work in brilliant style.

The first sounds of the hound showed that he was over the mountain crest, and within the following minute it was apparent to all that he was approaching, his baying rapidly growing more distinct.

This confirmed what his owner had said: he had held his peace until beyond the wild animal, so that the latter, when he awoke to the alarming fact that the hound was after him, naturally turned in the opposite direction, and was, therefore, coming toward the three hunters, though, of course, it must remain undecided for a time which trail he would take.

The baying of Hero continued at brief intervals, and drew near so fast that each of the three hunters knew the game was sure to pass near him, and one of them was to be favored with a shot before he was a quarter of an hour older.

Which would it be?

"I think I'm to be the lucky chap," reflected the delighted Tom, over on the left, "and I'll show Bob, who thinks he knows so much, that some things can be done as well as others. What the mischief is the matter with me?"

This impatient inquiry was caused by Tom's discovery that a singular nervousness had taken possession of him and was rapidly increasing. The belief that a wild animal was bearing down upon him and would soon break cover affected him as he had never been affected before.

He found himself trembling in every limb, while his teeth rattled as though he were shaking with the ague. Angered at his weakness, he strove desperately to overcome it, but, as is the rule at such times, though he was able to check himself for an instant, he was powerless to master his strange weakness.

I suppose I hardly need tell you that Tom was suffering from that peculiar nervousness known as "buck fever."

Experienced hunters laugh at amateurs when they see them overtaken by the exasperating disease (if it be proper to call it that), which never attacks them.

"Confound it!" muttered Tom, "I wonder whether Bob or Jim is affected this way; if I don't get better, I hope the deer won't come in sight of me."

Nevertheless, it quickly became apparent that the animal had taken the path on the left, and was approaching the impatient hunter, who had stationed himself behind the trunk of a large oak, with his gun at full cock, ready to let fly with both barrels the instant he saw the chance.

Each of the trails to which I have alluded were traversed so rarely that they showed only dimly, and were overhung by the luxuriant undergrowth and branches growing beside them. This prevented Tom seeing very far along the path, so that his ear gave him knowledge of the whereabouts of the animal before the eye located him.

The youth was still striving desperately to get the mastery of the buck fever, when he heard the crashing tread of the game, which was advancing along the trail, and unless he wheeled aside would pass within twenty feet of where he stood.

Suddenly a commotion was discernible among the vegetation, and the next instant Tom caught sight of the antlers of a noble buck, who was sailing along with such speed that the next second his shoulders and body burst into sight.

He was running fast with that peculiar lope natural to the animal, and no doubt was panic-stricken by the baying of the hound, not far behind and gaining fast.

The sight of the royal game intensified Tom's nervousness. He compressed his lips and held his breath, with the

resolve to calm his agitation or die in the attempt.

But finding it utterly beyond his power, he deliberately stepped from behind the tree, and when the buck was no more than fifty feet away, and coming head on, he let fly with both barrels.

Had the animal been perched in the topmost branches of the beech-tree on the left he would have received a mortal hurt, but as it was, he was not touched by a single pellet of the numberless shot that were sent hurtling and rattling among the leaves.

"Confound you!" muttered Tom, aware of his absurd failure; "I'll club you to death."

And swinging the butt of his weapon over his shoulder he rushed savagely at the beast.

In doing so, he ran into a peril of which he did not dream, for nothing is truer than that "a deer at bay is a dangerous foe," and he would have been practically helpless against an assault of the animal.

Had the latter been wounded there is little doubt that he would have lowered those beautiful antlers and charged directly at the ardent hunter, who would have been caught in a most unpleasant dilemma; but the fact that he was unharmed, added to the terrible baying coming closer every minute, drove all idea of fight from the buck, which wheeled sharply to one side and went crashing through the undergrowth toward the path where Bob Budd was waiting for him.

Tom Wagstaff was carried away by the excitement of the moment, and with his gun clubbed started in frantic pursuit of the fleeing game, resolved to help bring it down, even if he could not shoot it.

He doubtless would have chased the animal a considerable distance had the route been favorable, but beside the rocks and boulders there was no end to the wiry, running vines, one of which wrapped itself about his ankle in a fashion peculiar to its species, and Tom sprawled headlong on his face, his gun flying a half-dozen feet from his hands.

Still determined to keep up the pursuit, he hastily scrambled to his feet, and catching up the weapon, tore ahead with the same frantic haste as before.

Unfortunately for him, however, when he fell he was partly turned around, and his ideas were so confused that he started back over his own trail without a suspicion of the fact, not awaking to his blunder until too late to correct it.

In the meantime the buck was making matters lively not only for himself, but for the other parties.

The report of Tom's gun readied the ears of Bob and Jim as a matter of course, since they were quite near, but Bob knew that the shot had failed to bring down the game, since he was heard plunging through the wood toward the path beside which Bob Budd was excitedly awaiting his approach.

It would have been strange if Bob had not felt something of the nervousness that had played the mischief with Tom, but it was to a much less extent, so that he did not doubt his ability to fire as coolly and effectively as when practicing at a target.

It is a thrilling experience even for the veteran hunter when a noble buck breaks cover within easy gunshot, and the sight of the animal, as his leathery sides, proud head, and spreading antlers burst upon his vision, stirred the pulses of Bob Budd as they had not been stirred since his encounter with the Widow Finnegan, a couple of nights before.

"You're my game!" he exclaimed, aiming at the animal and discharging the two barrels in quick succession.

He did better than Tom Wagstaff, though he failed to drop the buck in his tracks, as he expected to do.

In fact, it seems to be one of the impossibilities to kill any of the *cervus* species instantly--that is, so as to cause him to fall at once, like many other animals when mortally hurt.

I once sent a bullet straight through the heart of a deer that was running broadside past me. He kept straight on with unabated speed for a dozen yards, when he crashed directly against the trunk of a tree and fell all in a heap. But for the tree in his way he would have run considerably further.

Bob lost his head very much as Tom had done a minute before, for observing that the buck did not fall, he clubbed his gun and rushed forward with the intention of braining him.

But from this point forward there was no parallelism in the flow of incidents.

The buck had been slightly wounded, just enough to rouse his anger. It is not impossible, also, that the sight of a second hunter and the sound of the baying hound near at hand convinced him that he was caught in close quarters and must make a fight for it.

So when Bob rushed to meet him, instead of fleeing, the buck lowered his antlers and rushed to meet Bob.

"Jewhilakens!" exclaimed the terrified youth, "I didn't think of *that*!"

And wheeling about, he fled for his life.

Where to go or precisely what to do except to run was more than the fugitive could tell.

Accordingly he sped with all the haste at his command, running, it may be said, as never before. His terror was unrestrainable when he cast a single glance over his shoulder and saw that the buck was in savage pursuit.

"Fire! murder! Tom and Jim! where are you? Come to my help, quick, or I'm a goner!" shouted Bob, dodging to the right and left like a Digger Indian, seeking to avoid the rifle shots of a pursuing enemy; "why don't you help me? The buck has got me and is going to chaw me all to pieces!"

CHAPTER XXII--HOT QUARTERS

In such critical moments events come and go with startling rapidity.

Bob Budd was never in greater peril than when fleeing from the enraged buck that was determined to kill him. It was not only able to run much faster than he, but he was practically powerless to defend himself, since his gun was empty, and though he might face about and deliver one blow, it could effect nothing in the way of slaying or checking the animal.

In his terror the fugitive did the best thing possible without knowing it.

He caught sight of a large oak that had been blown down by some violent gale, the trunk near the base being against the ground, which sloped gradually upward and away from the earth to the top, which was fully a dozen feet high, held in place by the large limbs bent and partly broken beneath.

Without seeing how this shelter was to prove of any help to him, he ran desperately for it.

Fortunately it was but a short distance off, or he never would have lived to reach it.

As it was, at the moment he gathered himself to spring upon the sloping trunk the pursuing buck reached and gave him a lift, which accomplished more than the fugitive wished, for instead of landing upon the trunk, he was boosted clean over, and fell on the other side.

Striking on his hands and knees, with his gun flying a rod from him, Bob crawled back under the tree, where he crouched in mortal terror.

The animal stopped short, and, rearing on his hind legs, brought his front hoofs together, and banged them downward with such force that they sank to the fetlocks into the earth.

His intention was to deliver this fearful blow upon the body of the boy, and had he succeeded in doing so it would have gashed his body as fatally as the downward sweep of a guillotine.

The interposition of the trunk saved Bob, but so close was the call that the sharp hoofs grazed his clothing.

In his panic lest the infuriated beast should reach him, Bob scrambled through so far that he passed from under the sheltering tree.

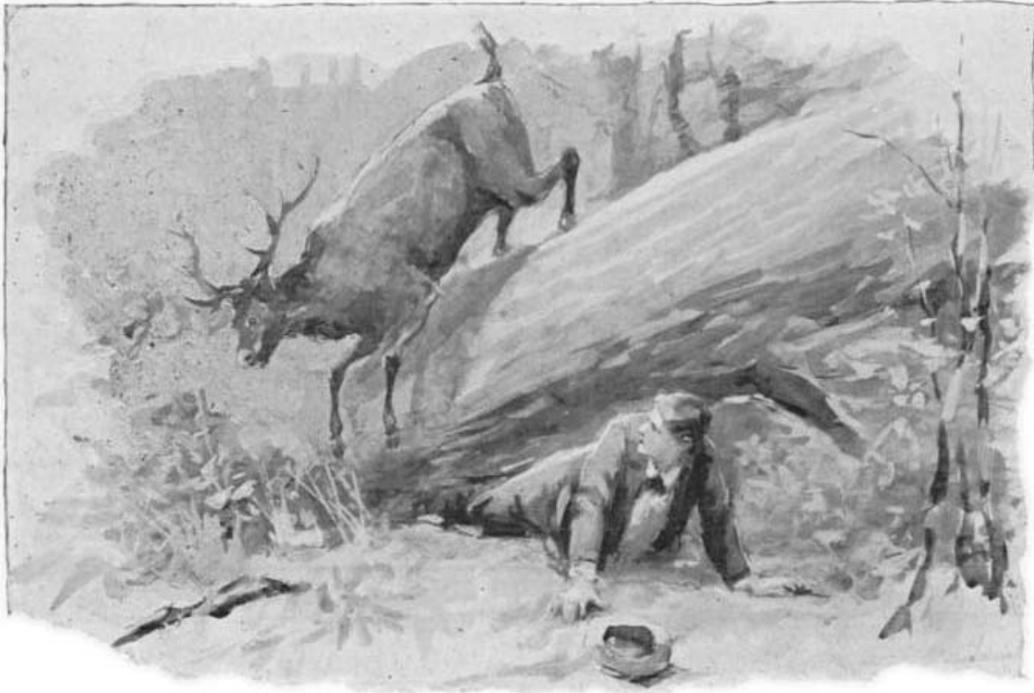
Quick to see his mistake, the buck leaped lightly over the prostrate trunk, and, landing on the other side, again rose on his hind legs, placed his front hoofs together and brought them down with the same terrific force as before.

Bob's escape this time was still narrower, for his coat was cut by the knife-like hoofs, which shaved off several pieces of the shaggy bark.

But the young hunter kept moving and scrambled out of reach from that side just in the nick of time.

The buck bounded over again, but Bob was quick to see his mistake, and now shrank into the closest quarters possible, taking care that the solid roof covered him.

Then he forced his body toward the base of the leaning tree, until the narrowing space permitted him to go no further, and he was so compressed that he could hardly breathe.



THE BUCK LEAPED LIGHTLY OVER THE PROSTRATE TRUNK

Meanwhile he did not forget to use his lungs.

"Tom! Jim! hurry up or I'm lost! Where are you? Come, quick, I tell you! the buck is killing me!"

The frantic appeal reached the ears it was intended for, and the two other Piketon Rangers dashed toward the spot, though not without misgiving, for the wild cries of their imperiled comrade warned them of the likelihood of running into danger themselves, and neither was ready to go to *that* extent to save their leader.

Tom Wagstaff was the first to reach the spot, and he paused for a moment, bewildered by the scene.

He saw the buck bounding back and forth over the tree, rising on his hind legs and bringing down his front hoofs with vicious force, occasionally lowering his antlers as he endeavored to force the fugitive out of his refuge.

At the first Tom could not locate Bob, whom he expected to see standing on his feet, braced against a tree and swinging his clubbed gun with all the power at his command.

The frantic shouts, however, enabled him to discover his friend, and he called back:

"Keep up courage, old fellow! I'm here, and will give the beast his finishing touch!"

The exasperating buck fever had vanished, and Tom's nerves were as steady as could be wished, though he was naturally flustered by the stirring situation.

Bringing his gun to his shoulder, he aimed directly at the beast, which could not have offered a better target, and pulled both triggers.

But no report followed.

"Confound it!" he muttered, "I forgot that the old thing wasn't loaded! Can't you stay there, Bob, for a day or two, till I go down to Piketon and bring forty or fifty people to pull you out?"

"No; I'll be killed," called back the furious Bob; "the buck will get at me in a minute more!"

"All right--"

"No, it aint; it's *all wrong!*" interrupted the terrified lad; "load your gun as quick as you can and shoot him!"

"That's what I'm trying to do--*good-bye!*"

At that juncture the buck seemed to decide there was a better chance of reaching Tom than there was of getting at Bob, so leaving him alone for the moment, he rushed at the former.

It was the sudden awakening to this fact which caused Tom to bid his comrade a hasty farewell and to take to his heels.

"I don't think an empty gun is much good to a fellow," said Tom, throwing it aside as he fled with great speed.

It was Tom's extremely good fortune that when he set on his frenzied flight he had a much better start than Bob Budd, and he knew enough to turn it to good account.

Heading straight for the nearest tree, he ran under it, making at the same moment the most tremendous bound of which he was capable.

This leap enabled him to grasp one of the lower limbs with both hands and to draw himself up out of reach at the moment the buck thundered beneath.

"I wonder whether a deer can climb a tree," was the shuddering thought of the fellow, as he looked downward at the animal from which he had just had such a narrow escape; "cause if he can, I'm in a bad box; I wish he would go back to Bob."

And that is precisely what the buck did do.

Quick to perceive that the second lad was beyond his reach, he wheeled about and trotted to the fallen tree.

Poor Bob, when he perceived the animal making after Tom, thought his relief had come, and began backing out from under the trunk of the oak.

He had barely time to free himself from the shaggy roof, when he looked around and saw that the buck was coming again.

"Hangnation! Why don't he let me alone?" he growled, and, it is safe to say, he never scrambled under shelter with such celerity in all his life.

Quick as he was, he was not an instant too soon, for once more the sharp hoofs came within a hair of cutting their way through his shoulder.

But so long as he shrank into the smallest possible space beneath the oak he was safe, though he felt anything but comfortable with the buck making such desperate efforts to reach him.

"Where the mischief is Jim?" growled Bob, who had just cause to complain of the dilatoriness of his companion; "why don't he come forward and help us out?"

Jim McGovern had not been idle. He was the only member of the Picketon Rangers that had a loaded gun at command, and when he heard the appeal of Bob Budd he hurried from his station to his help.

But, as I have intimated, there was no member of that precious band that thought enough of the others to risk his life to help him, and Jim, it may be said, felt his way.

Instead of dashing forward like Tom, who was ignorant of the combativeness sometimes displayed by a wounded buck, he moved cautiously until he caught sight of the respective parties without exposing himself to the fury of the wounded animal.

Jim arrived at the moment the beast made for Tom, and the sight alarmed him.

"What's the use of a fellow getting killed just to do a favor for some one that wouldn't do as much for you?" was the thought that held the chivalrous young man motionless, when he ought to have rushed forward to the defense of Bob Budd.

"Great Caesar!" muttered Jim, shrinking behind the tree which he was using for a concealment, "I never knew that a buck was such a savage animal; he's worse than a royal Bengal tiger that's been robbed of its young ones."

But Jim had a good double-barrelled gun in his hands, and he was so close to the buck that it seemed to him he ought to be able to riddle him with shot. Besides, Jim had not a particle of the buck fever which incapacitated Tom, but which does not attack every amateur hunter.

"The best thing I can do is to climb this tree," he added, looking upward at the limbs, "and then if I miss, why the buck can't get at me, for he don't look as though he's built for climbing trees."

At this juncture the buck was on the further side of the prostrate oak, trying to root out Bob from his shelter. Since he could not reach him with his hoofs, he seemed to believe that a vigorous use of his antlers would accomplish his purpose.

It looked as if he was about to succeed, for one of the blunt points gave Bob such a vigorous punch in his side that he howled with terror.

At the same moment, while staring about as best he could for the tardy Jim, he caught sight of his white face peering around the tree behind which he stood.

"Why don't you shoot, Jim?" he yelled; "do you want to see me killed? The buck is ramming his antlers into my side!"

The next punch he gives me they will go clean through."

At this instant another party arrived on the scene.

CHAPTER XXIII--A BRILLIANT SHOT

The new arrival was Hero the hound. He came on the scene with a rush and proceeded straight to business.

He did not need to pause to take in the situation, but with a faint whine and short yelp he bounded for the savage buck, which did not see him until they collided. But the old fellow was game. Though he had fled in a wild panic when the baying of the dog rang through the woods, yet now that he was at bay he fought like a Trojan.

Realizing that it was a fight for life, he whirled about, lowered those splendid antlers and went for the canine like a steam engine.

The dog had no wish to be bored through by such formidable weapons, and, with a bark of fear, he leaped back, alert and watchful for a chance to seize his victim by the throat.

Now was the time for the young hunters to put in the finishing touches, for the buck was so occupied with his new assailant that he could give them no attention.

Bob Budd dared not crawl from under the tree and run for his gun lying some yards away, which would have to be re-loaded before it could be of use to him.

But the young man was convinced that the golden opportunity for the others had arrived, and he did not hesitate to proclaim it in tones that could have been heard a half-mile off.

Tom Wagstaff was persuaded that he was safe so long as he remained astride of the limb where he had perched himself with such haste when the buck gave him a lively chase, and if he knew his own heart (as he was confident he did) he did not mean to descend from his elevation and run the risk of being elevated or bored by the antlers of the vicious buck.

"By the time I can get down there and get hold of my gun he will have the dog knocked out and then he'll start for *me*, and where will I be? No; I had enough hard work to climb up here and *I'll stay*."

And so, unmindful of the reproaches and appeals of the howling Bob, Tom continued to play the part of interested spectator.

The fight between the buck and the hound promised to be a prolonged one, though it looked as if the fine beast would have to succumb in the end.

Had he been able to get the dog in a corner where he could not dodge, it is probable he might have finished him, for one terrific ramming of those antlers would have been enough, but the agility of Hero saved him each time. When the horny weapons were lowered and the buck made a rush which seemed sure to impale the canine, he sprang nimbly aside like a skillful sparrer, still on the alert for an opening.

The deer displayed an intelligence that hardly would have been expected at such a time. He avoided rearing on his hind legs, and trying to hew his assailant with his fore-paws, as he had sought to do in the case of the youngsters, for such an effort on his part would have given Hero the fatal opening he wanted. One lightning-like bound, and his sharp teeth would have closed in the throat of the buck, and there they would have stuck until he gasped his last breath.

Not only that, but the hound would have kept his body out of reach of the hoofs, while, as a matter of course, the antlers would have been powerless against such a determined assailant.

It was this fact which must have been understood by the buck, that caused him to keep his head lowered and toward the hound, who, despite his rapid darting hither and thither, was unable for a time to catch him off his guard.

It was a forcible commentary on the incompetence and cowardice of the hunters, that there were three of them, all armed and one with both charges in his gun, and yet they dared not interfere while the feinting and striking was going on between the dog and buck.

It must be borne in mind that what I am relating took place in an exceedingly brief space of time.

But the contest, if such it may be called, between the two animals might have continued indefinitely, so far as Bob Budd and Tom Wagstaff were concerned.

The latter, as I have explained, was safely perched among the branches of a tree, while his unloaded gun lay on the ground some distance away, and it was certain to lie there until the struggle between Hero and the larger animal should be settled.

Bob was equally positive that it was his duty to keep himself squeezed beneath the trunk of the oak, though his dread of the animal caused him to edge as many inches as he dared toward the opposite side.

As for Jim McGovern, he was in a quandary. He was as strongly resolved as the other two to avoid any charge from the buck, reasoning that if neither of his brother Rangers was able to stay him with their loaded guns, it was improbable that he could do so with his single weapon.

But somehow or other he felt it incumbent upon him to make use of his gun, which he still held in hand with its two hammers raised and the triggers ready to be pressed.

He inclined to favor the scheme of climbing a tree, where he could open a bombardment at his leisure and smile at the anger of the buck that was so much interested in the hound.

But the difficulty with this plan was that of taking the weapon into the branches with him. To make his way up the trunk, he needed the use of all his limbs, arms as well as legs, and it was therefore out of his power to carry a heavy gun with him.

You will understand that the same obstacle would be encountered in grasping a limb and lifting himself upward, for a lad who drinks whiskey and smokes cigarettes can never be enough of an athlete to draw himself upward with a single arm.

At such times as I am describing the most sluggish brain thinks fast, and the thoughts I have named went through the head of Jim McGovern in a twentieth of the time taken to narrate them.

He was inclined to the theory that he ought to do *something*, though impatient with the continued yelling of Bob.

"Now's your chance, Jim! What are you waiting for? Shoot quick, for he'll soon kill the dog and then he'll finish *me!*"

"If you'll shut up for a minute," shouted Jim, in reply, "I'll shoot, but you're making such an infernal rumpus that I can't take aim."

At this hint Bob ceased his appeals and something like silence settled over the exciting scene.

The fiery Hero saw that he would soon have the buck at his mercy, for the animal was tiring himself out by his savage charges. Sometimes he would lower his antlers and dash forward for twenty paces at the dog, which deftly avoided him and saved his strength. Then the buck would slowly fall back, all the time maintaining his defiant front and charging again, often before he had fully recovered from his preceding effort.

It was an interesting fact that, during the few minutes occupied by this singular contest, each of the combatants met with a hair-breadth escape, so to speak, from the other.

Once when the buck made his rush, Hero, in leaping backward, collided with an obstruction on the ground which caused him to roll over and over, and the formidable antlers touched him; but with inimitable dexterity he regained his feet and escaped the sword-like thrust that grazed his skin.

No escape could have been narrower, but that which the buck met within the same minute was fully as narrow.

It may have been that Hero was a victim to some extent of the impatience which the youths around him felt, for seeing an opportunity he bounded like a cannon-ball from the earth at the throat of the buck.

The latter was quick to read the meaning of the crouching figure which left the ground before he could drop his antlers to receive him, else it would have gone ill for the assailant, but the buck flung his head backward just far enough to save his throat from those merciless fangs.

When it is stated that the flesh of the deer just back of his jaws was nipped by the same teeth which could not get a hold deep enough to be retained, it will be admitted that the fellow could not have had a closer call.

But these furious efforts were far more telling upon the larger animal than upon the dog, which could not have failed to understand that he had only to wait a brief while to have the buck at his mercy, and those teeth, once buried in the throat of the game, would stay there, as I have said, until the last gasp of life departed.

By and by Hero saw a better opening than before and instantly gathered his muscles for a spring.

A few seconds previous to this crisis Jim McGovern had mastered the idea that there was but one thing to do, and that was to take careful aim at the buck and kill him; no quicker means of ending the danger could be devised than that.

He had learned that a good place into which to send the charge, no matter what the species of the animal may be, is just behind the foreleg, where a well-aimed bullet or charge of shot fired at close quarters, is sure to reach the seat of life.

While running his eye along the barrel the buck turned broadside toward Jim, and thrusting one foot forward gave the very opportunity he wanted.

Fearful that he would shift his position the next instant, Jim discharged both barrels in quick succession.

The report was yet ringing through the woods when a rasping howl rose on the air that made the blood of every one tingle.

"I didn't know that deer let out such cries as that when they were shot," muttered Jim, lowering his gun and walking forward, "but I s'pose I sent both charges through his heart--*great Jewhilakens!*"

He had suddenly awakened to the fact that instead of shooting the buck he had sent both charges into the body of the hound, just as he was in the act of leaping at the throat of his victim.

The inevitable consequence of this blunder was that Hero lay stretched on the ground as dead as Julius Caesar.

CHAPTER XXIV--SUSPICIOUS FOOTPRINTS

"You blunderhead!" called Bob Budd, forgetting his own peril in his anger, "you've killed Hero. I hope the buck will gore you to death."

The triumphant animal seemed to be on the point of doing so, for he stood with head raised, his brown sides rising and falling like a pair of bellows from his severe exertion, looking at the young man that had fired the shot which ended the hunting career of Hero, as if debating with himself how best to end *his* hunting career.

It would be putting it mildly to say that Jim McGovern was dumbfounded. He was transfixed for an instant, and then, awaking to his own peril, he whirled about, threw down his gun, and dashed for the tree behind which he was standing a minute before.

Throwing both arms and legs around the trunk, as though it were a long lost brother, he began climbing fast and furiously.

It may be wondered whether a faint glimmering of the truth did not force itself through the brain of the buck that had had such a strange experience.

Can it be that he felt that the lad who had fired the last shot had in some way done him an inestimable service in removing the hound from his path?

Probably such a conception is beyond the reach of a wild animal, but, be that as it may, the buck, after staring a moment at the flying figure, turned and looked at Tom Wagstaff perched in the tree, and then gazed down at Bob Budd, who was doing his utmost to shrink into a smaller space than ever beneath the sloping trunk of the oak. Then, as if disgusted with the whole party, he turned about and deliberately trotted off in the woods, showing no further concern for those with whom he had had such a lively bout.

The wounds given by Bob Budd a short time before were so insignificant that, though they roused the animal's rage, they could not have caused him any inconvenience or suffering.

Finally, when it was apparent that the buck had departed for good, Tom Wagstaff descended from his perch in the tree, Jim McGovern slid down to the ground, Bob Budd backed out from beneath the oak, and each one recovering his gun, they came together in the open space where the dead Hero lay.

It was a characteristic meeting. Bob was maddened over the loss of his hound, while he and all three felt an unspeakable relief in knowing that the terrible buck had withdrawn without killing them.

"Of all shooting that I ever heard of, *that* is the worst," said Bob, with a sniff of disgust, pointing at the carcass of Hero.

"It was better than yours," retorted Jim, "for it killed *something*, while yours didn't hurt anything."

"I hit the buck, any way," said Bob, sullenly.

"The buck didn't act as though he knew it," was the truthful comment of Tom Wagstaff.

"I don't see that *you* have any chance to talk," retorted Bob; "for you fired both barrels at him and then yelled for us to come and save you."

"But you didn't come, and I had to run out here to help you."

"Yes; and the minute you caught sight of the buck you took to a tree."

"I was only doing what you had done a minute before," said Tom; "only I had better sense than to try to crawl *under* a tree."

"Because you hadn't any to crawl under, *that's* the only reason."

"There aint any of us in shape to find fault with the others, for we have all made an exhibition that it's lucky nobody else saw."

"It seems to me," said Bob, "that we don't amount to much as hunters; what do you suppose has become of that buck?"

"He isn't far off, but I don't believe it will do to hunt him."

"Why not?"

"There is too much danger of finding him," was the significant reply of Bob.

The point of this remark was so apparent to all that they smiled and agreed that the best thing they could do was to return to camp. They naturally felt exhausted after their lively experience with the animal, of whose pluck they had gained a better knowledge than ever before.

"Suppose there had been *two* of them," remarked Tom, leading the way down the mountain path.

"Then there wouldn't have been any of us," replied Jim, who was walking next to him, Bob Budd bringing up the rear.

"I don't believe there's half so much fun in hunting as a good many people fancy," was the sage observation of young Wagstaff, who found it so much easier to walk down than up the path, that he felt inclined to discuss their recent experience.

"Well, for those that like that kind of sport, why, that's the kind of sport they like. As for me, I'd rather stretch out in the camp and take things easy."

This picture was so fascinating to the others that they hastened their footsteps so as to reach their headquarters with the least possible delay.

"I can't help feeling grateful for one thing," remarked Bob, from the rear of the procession.

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"That Jim shot poor Hero instead of me. I can't understand how I escaped, for we weren't more than twenty feet apart, and Jim was fully as far as that from the buck when he took such careful aim."

"My aim was all right," replied Jim, "but after the charge left the gun the hound and the buck changed places. If they hadn't moved the game would have caught it."

Since, as I have explained, large game was exceedingly rare in that section of the country, and since, also, the Piketown Rangers had been unusually favored in scaring up a fine buck on such short notice, it would seem they had no reason to believe there was any probability of encountering any more quadrupeds larger than a rabbit.

All the same, however, each member of the party should have seen to it that his gun was loaded before moving from the scene of the flurry with the buck. Such is the rule among hunters, and you will admit that it is a good one.

Nevertheless, all were trudging down the mountain-side with empty weapons and with never a thought of preparation for meeting any more game.

Had the buck suddenly made his appearance nothing would have remained for them but to take to their heels; but inasmuch as they would have done that if their guns were ready, I don't see that it made so much difference after all.

A short distance farther the trio reached a tiny stream of icy cold and clear water, which bubbled from the rocks only a short distance away on their left.

Naturally they were athirst again, and, since all their flasks had been exhausted long before, they were driven to the necessity of slaking their thirst with the *aqua pura*.

This was done in the original fashion with which I am quite sure all my boy readers are familiar. Lying on their faces they touched their lips to the sparkling fluid, and each drank his fill.

"Ahem!" sighed Jim McGovern, drawing the back of his hand across his mouth, "that aint so bad when you can't get anything better."

"Yes," assented Bob, "when a fellow is dying with thirst he can make out very well on that stuff, but it's mighty thin."

"I would hate to be obliged to stick to it," added Tom.

And yet every one of that precious party knew in his own heart that the ingenuity of man cannot compound a nectar to be compared in soulful, refreshing deliciousness with the tasteless, colorless, odorless drink of nature.

Stick to *that*, boys, and never touch a drop of the enemy which, put in the mouth, steals away the brains and wrecks not only the body but the immortal soul.

"I think I can go a little more of that," said Jim, kneeling down again and helping himself as before; "I shouldn't wonder now that if there was a tax put on water the same as on whiskey a good deal more of it would be drunk."

Tom Wagstaff was standing a few feet farther up the streamlet, carefully scrutinizing the ground.

"What are you looking at?" asked Bob Budd.

"Aint those dents the tracks of some wild animal?" he asked, pointing to the damp, yielding earth on the other side.

Jim and Bob stepped beside him and scrutinized the marks that so interested their companion.

"By jingo!" exclaimed Jim, "they are the tracks of *something*, and if they were made by a man, then he's got the queerest feet I ever seen on anybody."

Bob stepped across the brook and stooped down that he might examine the impressions more closely.

"What do you s'pose?" he asked, looking up in the faces of his companions with a scared expression.

"We s'pose we don't know what made the tracks."

"But *guess*" insisted Bob, with provoking deliberation.

"An elephant?"

"No."

"A hippopotamus?"

"Nothing of the kind."

"How can we guess?" asked Jim, impatiently; "if you know anything about it let us know, and if you don't know, say so."

"Those tracks were made by a *big black bear!*"

CHAPTER XXV--UP A TREE

"Gracious!" gasped Tom Wagstaff, "let's run!"

"I agree with Tom," added Jim, glancing furtively around, as though he expected to see the dreadful beast rush out of the woods after them.

"You're a fine set of hunters, aint you?" sneered Bob; "after coming out to hunt game you want to run when you strike the trail of the very creature you're looking for."

"I aint looking for bears," said Tom, "I haven't lost any."

"And besides," added Jim, "there isn't any fallen tree here where we can crawl under to get out of the way."

"But there's plenty of trees which you can climb--*there he comes now!*"

Tom and Jim each glanced affrightedly around, not knowing which way to run to escape the dreaded brute.

But it was a joke of Bob's, and he made the woods ring with his laughter, while, as may be supposed, the others were in no amiable mood.

"I don't see any fun in that sort of thing," growled Tom.

"You may do like the boy in the fable, who shouted 'Wolf!' once too often," added Jim, ashamed of his weakness.

The next instant Tom Wagstaff shouted: "*There he comes and no mistake!*"

Tom and Jim were standing on one side of the streamlet, facing Bob on the other side, so that his back was turned toward the point at which they were gazing.

The expression on the countenance of the couple was that of extreme alarm, though such a brief time had elapsed since Bob had given them a scare that they had not yet recovered from it.

"You're right!" Jim added, instantly, as he and Tom wheeled and dashed off at the top of their speed through the woods.

Bob was determined they should not fool him. He laughed again in his hearty fashion, throwing back and shaking his head.

"You can't come that, boys!" he called, "it's too soon after my little joke on you."

"But, Bob, we aint joking," shouted back Jim, looking over his shoulder, but still running; "the bear is coming as sure as you are born."

"You can't fool me."

Bob had not the remotest suspicion that his friends were in earnest, but the sight of them climbing the same tree led him to think they were pushing their poor joke with a great deal of vigor.

At this same moment he heard a crashing and trampling among the bushes behind him, and, checking the words on his lips, turned his head.

The bear *was* coming!

An enormous fellow of the ordinary black species had been descried by Tom and Jim when less than a hundred yards away, and he was advancing straight toward the spot where the three were standing.

They were in dead earnest, therefore, when they fled, calling to Bob the frightful news.

Had not Bob just played a joke on them he would not have doubted their sincerity, so that in one sense his peril was a punishment for his own misdoing.

It need not be said that the laughter on Bob Budd's lips froze, and he made a break after his companions, who had so much the start of him.

"Gracious!" he muttered, "I didn't think they were in earnest; I'm a goner this time sure."

Nevertheless he had no thought of sitting down and waiting to be devoured by bruin, who lumbered along in his awkward fashion, rapidly drawing near him.

Bob's hat went off, his gun was flung from his hand, and with one bound he landed far beyond the edge of the

streamlet and made after his friends, throwing terrified glances over his shoulder at the brute, which took up the pursuit as though it was the most enjoyable sport he had had in a long time.

Once more the exasperating vines got in the way, and the panic-stricken fugitive fell sprawling on his hands and knees, bounding instantly to his feet and making for the tree where his friends had secured refuge.

By this time the bear was almost upon him, so close indeed that he reached out one of his paws to seize his victim.

No words can picture the terror of Bob Budd when he felt the long nails scratching down his back and actually tearing his coat, but bruin was a few inches too short, and the youth made such good time that he struck the tree a number of paces in advance of his pursuer.

The fugitive, however, did not stop, for before he could climb the brief distance necessary to reach the limbs, the beast would have had him at his mercy. He therefore continued his flight, yelling in such a delirium of fright that he really did not know what words escaped him.

"Why don't you come down?" he called to his friends, "and give me a chance? Let him chase *you* awhile."

It is unnecessary to state that neither Tom nor Jim accepted the urgent invitation of their imperiled comrade.

"Run hard, Bob, and show him what you can do!" called back Tom, who really thought it was all over with their leader.

This shout accomplished more than was expected. The noise led the bear to look up the tree, where he observed the two boys perched but a short distance above him. He seemed all at once to lose interest in the fugitive, who continued his flight some distance farther, when, finding his enemy was not at his heels, he sprang for a sapling, up which he went like a monkey.

The trouble with Bob, however, was that he climbed too high. It was a small hickory, not much thicker than his arm. This kind of wood, as you are aware, is very elastic, and the first thing the lad knew was that the upper part, to which he was clinging, bent so far over that it curved like a bow, and before it stopped he had sank to within six or eight feet of the ground.

Had the bear continued his pursuit, Bob would have been in an unfortunate predicament; but, casting a glance behind him, he noticed the beast had stopped under the tree supporting Tom and Jim.

Two courses were open to him, either of which would have secured his safety.

He had time enough to drop from the sapling and take to a larger one, up which he could have climbed and been beyond harm; or he could have slid a little farther down the hickory, so as to allow it to right itself, and he still would have been safe, for a bear is unable to climb a tree so slight in diameter that his paws meet around it.

But Bob was too terrified to do either. He simply held fast, and did the worst thing possible: he continued to shout for his companions to come to his help.

By this means he once more attracted the notice of bruin to himself, whereas, if he had held his peace, he would have given the whole of his attention to the two boys in the larger tree.

The bear had reared on his haunches, seemingly with the intention of striving to reach the lads, when he turned his head and took a look at the one in the sapling.

Stupid as is bruin by nature, he saw that it would be easier for him to reach the single fugitive than the others, and he proceeded to do so.

You need not be told that Tom and Jim, like Bob, had thrown away their guns again in their frenzied flight, through fear that they would retard their efforts to get beyond his reach.

Poor Bob, when he found himself once more the object of the animal's undivided attention, felt as though he might as well let go and be devoured at once. All the same, though, he hung fast and continued his cries, which, had there been time, would have brought help from the distance of a mile.

He was clinging to the sapling with both hands, and his two feet, that were wrapped about the small trunk, only a short distance below his shoulders. This caused the centre of his body to hang down like the lower point of a horseshoe, the curve being sharper than that of the bowed hickory.

Halting directly under the howling lad, the bear reared on his haunches, reached upward with one paw and struck Bob a sharp blow. It caused him no material damage, but set the body to swaying back and forth. At the same time the hickory nodded, letting the lad sink a few inches and then rising with a regular, swinging motion.

This would have ceased in a moment of itself, but for the action of the bear, who, every time the body came within easy reach, hit it a sharp tap with his paw, causing it to swing back and forth in a sort of rhythmic accord with the dipping of the sapling.



AN AWKWARD PREDICAMENT

It is said that some, and indeed all, animals possess a certain waggery of disposition which shows itself on rare occasions. The bear inflicted no injury on Bob, but the scraping of those long, sharp claws did considerable damage to his trousers, while keeping his fears at the boiling point.

It certainly was a grotesque scene.

There sat bruin, with his right paw raised, regularly tapping Bob, while the latter, with his hands and feet close together, and his body doubled up like a jack-knife, swung up and down with a steady motion, in response to the impetus given by the brute.

Of course the latter was silent, though if he had possessed the capacity to laugh, there can be no doubt that he would have done so, for, aside from the ever-present peril threatening the fellow, a more amusing sight cannot be imagined.

Even Tom and Jim, when they saw their companion was suffering no harm, broke into mirth, which grated on the nerves of the victim of a most unprecedented combination of circumstances.

But sooner than Jim or Tom suspected the moment came when the laugh was "on the other side of the mouth."

CHAPTER XXVI--HUNTING THE HUNTERS

Bob Budd played the part of pendulum to the bear for perhaps ten minutes or less, during which he kept up his outcries, and Tom and Jim laughed till they were in danger of falling from their perch in the tree.

"If Bob had only known what was coming," said Tom, "he could have had his trousers lined with sheet iron, and then he might have joined in the laugh too."

"Why don't he give the bear a kick with his foot and knock him over? He ought to have knowed enough to climb a big tree like us."

"Helloa! what's up now?"

Without any apparent reason bruin at this moment dropped down on all fours, and, leaving Bob Budd to himself, lumbered over under the refuge of the other two fugitives.

They felt no special fear, for it seemed impossible that the animal could do them harm.

Bob's experience was not lost upon him. He realized the mistake he made when he took refuge in the sapling, and he now repaired it before the opportunity passed.

Letting go, he dropped lightly on his feet and ran for another tree double the size of the hickory, up which he hurriedly climbed to where the limbs put out a dozen feet above the ground.

Here, as he flung one leg over the strong support, he felt that at last he was safe against a regiment of bears.

Meanwhile, bruin was giving attention to Messrs. James McGovern and Thomas Wagstaff.

He first walked deliberately around the tree several times, as if searching for some vulnerable point, occasionally looking up at the grinning youngsters and snuffing like one impatient to secure his dinner.

"I wonder what he means by *that*" said Jim, with a vague feeling of alarm.

"He wants us to see what a big fellow he is."

"He is a bouncer and no mistake," was the truthful comment of Jim.

"I wouldn't care if he was ten times as large--good gracious! look at *that*!"

Well might the boys start in alarm, for at that moment the brute began climbing the tree!

They had lost sight of the fact, if indeed they ever knew it, that the black bear is a famous climber when the trunks are big enough to be grasped without his paws interfering.

While Tom and Jim were congratulating themselves on being safe beyond all possible harm, they discovered they were not safe at all.

Bruin was on the point of ascending to their perch, when he was tempted aside by the shouting of Bob Budd in the sapling, and he went off to have some sport with him.

Why the brute should have left Bob at the time he had him within reach it would be hard to say. It may have been he concluded that the single lad had afforded him enough entertainment, and the moment had come for the other two to take a hand.

The consternation of Tom and Jim may be imagined when they saw those massive paws embrace the shaggy bark, which began to crumble beneath the vigorous clawing of the nails, while the huge black body slowly but steadily ascended toward the limbs, where the white-faced youngsters watched his terrifying action.

Bob's turn had come to laugh, and he called out:

"Wait till he gets up among the branches, then drop and run for a tree that is too small for him to climb."

This was good advice perhaps, though it occurred to the boys, for whom it was intended, that if they allowed their foe to approach that near it would be too late for them to flee.

Bruin had not very far to ascend when his huge, pig-like head was thrust among the limbs, and he slowly drew his ponderous body after him.

He was now close to the fugitives, one of whom was perched above the other, and both as far out on the branches as

they could get without breaking them.

The big, shaggy form being fairly among the limbs, at the point where they put out from the tree, bruin paused a minute, like a general surveying the battle plain before him.

There were the two cowering boys about a dozen feet off, apparently without any hope of escaping his wrathful appetite. All he had to do was to make his way out on the branches and gather them in.

It will be seen that there was some difficulty in the bear's path, since his weight would not allow him to advance clear to his victims, unless he used some other limb for his support.

As ill-luck would have it, the very means required was at his command.

Directly beneath Tom and Jim was another branch, broad and strong enough to support two large bears. It was so near the ground that the boys used the limbs immediately above, with a view of making sure they were beyond the reach of the biggest kind of animal on *terra firma*.

"Here he comes!"

It was Tom who uttered the exclamation, and he spoke the truth, for at that moment bruin began cautiously moving out on the heavy limb just under them.

"It's a good time to leave," whispered Jim, who, while the words were in his mouth, let go and dropped to the ground.

Tom was but an instant behind him, imitating him so quickly, indeed, that he struck directly upon his shoulders.

But no harm was done, and they were instantly up and off.

It will be seen from this that the couple adopted substantially the advice of Bob Budd, which contained more wisdom than most of his utterances.

Like their leader, the fugitives heeded the dearly bought lesson, and, instead of taking refuge in a large tree or sapling, they chose one of precisely the right size, each perching himself where he was as far beyond reach as Bob Budd himself.

The lads were given plenty of time in which to take their new departure, since the bear, instead of leaping to the ground as they did, picked his way back to the body of the tree, and slid down that to the earth, tearing off a lot of the bark in his descent.

This required so much time that when he once more stood on solid earth all three of the boys were out of his reach, and could afford to laugh at his anger.

Halting a short distance from the tree, bruin looked at the boys in turn with such an odd expression that they laughed.

Gradually the idea appeared to work itself into the thick brain of the animal that there was nothing to be made by remaining in that particular part of the country, though his reluctance to leave caused no little misgiving on the part of all three of the youths.

If he should decide to stay until the party were compelled to choose between starving to death and coming down, the situation, to say the least, would have its inconveniences.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Jim, a quarter of an hour after this possible complication had been discussed by the youngsters from their different perches.

The bear seemed to have decided that it was useless to hang around the neighborhood, and began moving off in his lumbering fashion. He was attentively watched until he vanished in the dense wood.

"We're all right *now*" called Bob.

"Maybe he is trying to fool us," suggested Tom; "you had better stay where you are awhile longer."

"Who's afraid?" defiantly called back Bob, sliding nimbly down the sapling; "you don't catch me running from a bear again; all I want is a chance to get hold of my gun and load it--Jewhilakens!"

A roar of laughter broke from Jim and Tom, who at that moment caught sight of the brute coming back at a faster rate than he had departed.

Bob was equally quick in descrying his danger, and the manner in which he shinned up the sapling would have surprised a trained athlete, who could not have surpassed it.

"When is the fraud going to leave?" he growled, looking down on the intruder that had stopped directly under him; "I don't know whether bears are good waiters, but I hope he won't try to keep us here more than a week."

Bruin went snuffing around the spot, clawing the guns curiously, gazing up at each lad in turn, and finally starting off

once more.

The boys hoped his departure was for good, but you may be sure they did not discount it. When, however, a half-hour went by without his being seen, all felt there was ground for hope.

It seemed safe to experiment a little, and so Bob once more slid down the sapling, after carefully reconnoitering all the forest in his field of vision. He held himself ready also to climb again the instant the beast reappeared.

The boys were too frightened to attempt any jokes on each other, and when Tom and Jim reported that bruin was not in sight, Bob believed them.

His gun was lying not far off, and he began timidly making his way toward it. Step by step he advanced, glancing in every direction, and ready to dart back the instant he saw or heard anything suspicious.

Finally he stooped over and picked up the weapon. Still the bear was invisible, and Bob hurriedly reloaded his gun, though it cannot be claimed that he felt much more secure than before.

Thus encouraged, Tom and Jim ventured to descend from their respective trees, and they also recovered their weapons without bringing their enemy down upon them.

"It must be he's gone for good," said Jim, in a guarded undertone.

"It looks that way," replied Tom, "and the best thing we can do is to follow suit."

This was the unanimous sentiment, and it was acted upon without delay.

It cannot be said that a single member of the Picketon Rangers breathed freely until fully a half-mile from the scene of their adventure with the bear.

The slightest noise caused them to start and gaze around with rapidly-beating hearts; they spoke only a few words and they were in undertones, while they paused a half-dozen times in the belief that some stump or dark-colored boulder was the dreaded brute awaiting their approach.

But by the time the half-mile was passed they grew more confident. They spoke in ordinary tones, and did not start at the sound of every rustling leaf.

"That's the last hunt I ever make up there," said Jim McGovern, turning about and glaring at the mountainous slope as though it had done him a personal injury.

"I'm with you," replied Tom Wagstaff; "them as like to have their brains banged out by bucks ten feet high or chawed up by bears as big as an elephant are welcome, but not any for me."

"I feel sort of that way myself," assented Bob; "it's the first time I've tried it since I was a tot of a boy, but I've had enough to last me for the next three hundred and eighty-five years. I hope Uncle Jim won't ask too many questions about Hero, because he thought a good deal of that hound."

"He needn't ever know that he departed this life through a mysterious dispensation of Providence," replied Jim; "all that it is necessary to learn--and I don't know that there's any need of *that*--is that Hero went off on an exploring expedition and hasn't yet returned. The particulars of his shipwreck are unobtainable, as is often the case with other explorers."

"Oh! I can manage it, I've no doubt, for I was never yet caught in a scrape that I couldn't get out of," was the cheerful response of Bob Budd.

The day was well gone when the three reached their tent at the base of Mount Barclay, and they were glad enough to get back again.

During their absence Aunt Ruth had sent one of the hired men, as was her custom, with a liberal supply of delicacies, which were disposed of in the usual vigorous style of the three, who were honest when they agreed that they had had enough hunting of bears and deer to last them a lifetime.

"If we could only manage the thing without so much work," said Bob, "we might find some fun in it; but we had to climb up that mountain, which is three times as high as I supposed, and when the danger came, why we hadn't our usual strength."

"I think we did pretty well," replied Tom Wagstaff, "but all the same I don't believe it would read very well in print."

"Who's going to put it in print?" asked Bob; "we know too much to tell any one about it, or, if we did, we would get it in a shape that would do us proud."

"Well, being as we have had all we want of hunting, the next thing will be--what?"

"Doing nothing," replied Wagstaff.

"We can do the next thing to that, which is just as good."

"What's that?" asked Bob.

"Fish; stretch out along-shore in the shade, where there's no danger of rolling in, or go out in a boat and wait for the fish to bite, not caring much whether they do or not. The best thing about fishing is that you never have to tire yourself--"

"*Hark!*"

At that moment the three heard a prodigious roar, rapidly increasing in volume, until the air seemed to be filled with one continuous reverberating peal of thunder.

"Heaven save us!" exclaimed Bob Budd; "the dam has burst!"

"And it is coming down on us and we can't get out of its path!" added white-faced Wagstaff.

He spoke the truth!

CHAPTER XXVII--A RACE FOR LIFE

Those who have been so unfortunate as to be placed in the path of an overwhelming flood, which after slowly gathering for weeks and months finally bursts all barriers, need not be told that the awful roar caused by the resistless sweep can never be mistaken for anything else.

The mill-dam, to which we have made more than one reference, had not been erected, like that at Johnstown, to afford fishing grounds for those who were fond of the sport, but was reared fully twenty years before to provide water-power for a company of capitalists, who proposed erecting a series of mills and manufactories in the valley below. They progressed as far in their enterprise as the formation of a substantial dam when the company collapsed, and that was the end of their scheme.

The dam remained, with its enormous reservoir of water, which, in summer, furnished excellent fishing and, in the winter, fine skating; but during all that time the valuable store of power remained idle.

The sudden breakage of the dam, without apparent cause, was unaccompanied by the appalling features which marked the great disaster in Pennsylvania a short time since. The town of Picketon was not in the course of the flood, nor were there any dwelling-houses exposed to the peril with the exception of the home of a single humble laborer.

The water became a terrific peril for a brief while, but such masses speedily exhaust themselves, though it was fortunate indeed that the topography of the country was so favorable that the uncontrollable fury was confined in so narrow a space.

But the camp of the Picketon Rangers lay exactly in the course of the flood. Bob Budd and his friends had pitched their tent there because the spot was an inviting one in every respect, and no one had ever dreamed of danger from the breaking of the reservoir above.

It was night when that fearful roar interrupted the conversation of the Rangers. The young men were silent on the instant, and stared with bated breath in each other's faces.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed Bob Budd, rising partly from his seat, "the dam has burst!"

"And I can't swim a stroke!" gasped the terrified Wagstaff.

"Nor me either!" added McGovern; "I guess the end has come, boys."

"I can swim," replied Bob, trembling from head to foot, "but that won't help me at such a time as this."

"Are we going to stay here and be drowned?" demanded Jim, rousing himself; "we might as well go down fighting; every one for himself!"

As he uttered this exclamation he dashed through the tent and among the trees outside, where the rays of the moon could not penetrate, and it was dark as Egypt.

A strong wind seemed to be blowing, though a few minutes before the air was as still as at the close of a sultry summer afternoon. The wind was cool. It was caused by the rush of waters through the dense forest.

It was evident to McGovern and the rest that there was but one possible means of escape--possibly two--and he attempted that which first occurred to him: that was by dashing at right angles to the course of the torrent. If he could reach ground higher than the surface of the water, as it came careering through the wood, he would be safe; but he and his companions knew when the awful roar broke upon them that the waters were close, while it was a long run to the elevated country on either side.

But if anything of the kind was to be attempted there was not a moment to spare. One second might settle the question of life and death.

"Maybe I can make it!" was the thought that thrilled McGovern as he began fighting his way through the wood, stumbling over bushes, bumping against trunks, and picking his way as best he could; "it isn't very far to the high ground, but I have to go so blamed slow--great thunder! my head's sawed off!"

At that moment a stubby limb caught under the chin of the frantic fugitive and almost lifted him off his feet. He quickly freed himself and dashed wildly on again with feelings that must have resembled those of the multitude fleeing from before the sweep of the overwhelming lava.

A vine enclosed the ankle of the fugitive and he fell headlong; he was instantly up again and collided with a tree, which

he did not detect soon enough in the gloom; at any other time McGovern would have taken his own time in rising and vented his feelings, but he did not do so now; his single thought was one wild, desperate hope that he might escape.

He never exerted himself so before, for, despite the stirring experiences through which he had passed in his short life, he had never encountered anything like this.

Those who have hovered on the verge of death have made known that in the few seconds when life was passing, the whole record of their former lives has swept like a panorama before them. The events of months and years have clustered in those few fearful moments.

Jim McGovern's experience was somewhat similar. There were mighty few seconds at his command, while struggling with the whole energy of his nature to reach the rising ground beyond reach of the flood; but in some respects that brief interval of time was as so many years to him.

How well it will be if, when we reach that supreme moment which must come to all of us, the hasty retrospect brings us pleasure and hope rather than remorse and despair!

There was nothing of this nature in the review that surged through the brain of the miserable fellow. Broken promises, disobedience to parents, wrangling, thievery, drinking--these were the scarlet tints of the picture which memory painted for him in vivid colors.

"If you'll only save me," he gasped, addressing the sole One who could rescue him, "I will stop the bad things I've been doing all my life, and do my best to live right always."

Would he never pass the boundary of this narrow valley? It had always seemed straight to him before, but now its width was expanded not to yards and rods, but to miles. And never were the trees so close together or the bushes, vines, and undergrowth so dense, or his own wind so short, or his muscles so weak.

Suddenly something cold was felt against his ankle.

He knew what it was--it was water!

The fringe of the flood had reached him. Where the bursting away was so instantaneous and the released volume was so enormous, the flow could not be like that of an ordinary torrent, which rises rapidly because of the swiftly-increasing mass behind it. The awful rush at Johnstown resembled the oncoming of a tidal wave or wall of water, so high, so prodigious, so resistless that nothing less than the side of a granite mountain could check it.

It would have been the same in the case we are describing, though of course to a less degree, but for the interposing wood, which, beginning at the very base of the dam, continued the entire length of the valley, which was several miles in extent.

Some of these trees were uprooted as if by a cyclone, others were bent and partly turned over, while the sturdiest, which did not stand near the middle of the path, held their own, like giants resisting death tugging at their vitals.

The woods also acted as a brake, so to speak, on the velocity of the terrific rush of waters. The flow could not be stopped nor turned aside, but it was hindered somewhat, and, as it came down the hollow, was twisted and driven into all manner of eddies, whirlpools, and currents, in which the most powerful swimmer was as helpless as an infant.

"It's no use!" panted McGovern, when he felt the cold current rising about his ankles like the coiling of a water-snake; "I must die, and with all my sins on my head! Heaven have mercy! do not desert me now when a little farther and I will be saved!"

Never was a more agonized appeal made to his Creator than that by the despairing McGovern.

CHAPTER XXVIII--A CRY FROM THE DARKNESS

Within a few seconds after McGovern felt the water about his ankles it touched his knees. He was still able to make progress, and with the same despairing desperation as before, struggled onward.

At the next step he went to his waist, and fell with a splash.

"I'm drowning!" he gasped; but fortunately for him he had plunged into a small hollow, out of which he was swept the next moment, and, with no effort on his part, flung upon his feet.

The roar was overpowering. It seemed as if he were in the appalling swirl of Niagara, with the raging waters all around him clamoring for his life. He grasped a limb which brushed his face, and the next step showed that he had struck higher ground.

But the torrent was ascending faster than he. It was gaining in spite of all he could do, but hope was not yet dead. Another step and the water was below his waist, and he was able to make progress with the help of his hands. When he lifted one foot it was swept to one side, and only by throwing his full weight upon it was he able to sustain himself.

He had now reached a point where the trees were not so near together. While this enabled him to see something of his surroundings, it gave the sweeping volume greater power, and he was in despair again.

But the dim light of the moon showed that at that moment the boundary of the current was only a few paces beyond him. Could he pass that intervening distance before it further expanded he would be safe.

Rousing his flagging energies he fought on, cheered by the view of a figure on the margin, which had evidently caught sight of him.

"A little farther and you will be all right!" shouted the stranger, stepping into the torrent and extending his hand.

"I can't do it!" moaned McGovern, struggling on, but gaining no faster than the terrible enemy against which he was fighting.

"Yes, you will! don't give up! take my hand!"

McGovern reached out, but he was short of grasping the friendly help. Then the brave friend stepped into the rushing torrent at the risk of his own life, and, griping the cold hand, exerted himself with the power of desperation, and dragged the helpless youth into the shallow margin.

"Don't stop!" he shouted, still pulling him forward; "we are not yet out of danger!"

Helped by the stranger who had appeared so opportunely, the two splashed through the flood, which seemed striving to prevent their escape, and would drag them down in spite of themselves.

But the rescuer was cool-headed, strong, and brave, and he kept the weak McGovern going with a speed that threatened to fling him prostrate in spite of himself.

The ground rose more sharply than before. A few more hurried steps and their feet touched dry land. Still a few paces farther and they were saved.

The torrent might roar and rage, but it could not seize them. They had eluded its wrath, like the hunter who leaps aside from the bound of the tiger.

McGovern stood for a minute panting, limp, and so exhausted that he could hardly keep his feet. His companion did not speak, but kept his place beside him, curiously gazing into his countenance, and waiting until he should fully recover before addressing him.

The youth speedily regained his self-command, and for the first time looked in his rescuer's face. They were now beyond the shadow of the trees, and could discern each other's features quite distinctly in the favoring moonlight.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "I think you and I have met before."

"I shouldn't be surprised if we had," was the reply; "you tried to destroy my bicycle last night."

"And you saved me from drowning in the mill-pond."

"I believe I gave you a little help in that way."

"And now you have saved my life again."

"I am glad I was able to do something for you, for you seemed to be in a bad way."

"I should think I was! If you had been a minute later it would have been the last of Jim McGovern, and I tell you, Dick Halliard, he was in no shape to die."

No person escaping death by such a close call could throw off at once the moral effect of his rescue. The bad youth was humbled, frightened, and repentant. He was standing in the presence of him who had twice been the instrument of saving his life in a brief space of time, and that, too, after McGovern had tried to do him an injury.

"I don't know whether you can forgive me," he said, in the meekest of tones, "but I beg your pardon all the same."

"I have no feeling against you," replied Dick, "and though you sought to do me an injury, you inflicted the most on yourself; but," added the young hero, starting up, "where are Bob Budd and Tom Wagstaff?"

"Heaven only knows! They must be drowned," replied McGovern, glancing at the raging waters so near him with a shudder, as if he still feared they would reach and sweep him away.

"Where did you leave them? How did you become separated?"

"We were in our tent when we heard the waters coming. We felt we couldn't help each other, and all made a break, some in one direction and some another. They must have been drowned, just as I would have been but for you."

But what could he do to help them? He was standing as near to the torrent as he dare. It had already submerged the spot where the tent had been erected to the depth of twenty feet at least. Bob and Tom could not have stayed there had they wished, nor was there any means of reaching them.

"I wish I could do something," said Dick, as if talking with himself, "but I see no way."

"There is none," added McGovern, who was speedily recovering from the ordeal through which he had passed, "but it is too bad; I would do anything I could for poor Bob and Tom."

It seemed hopeless indeed, but Dick could not stand idle, knowing that others near him might be in most imminent need of help.

"If they are alive, which I don't believe," said McGovern, "they must have drifted below us by this time."

"I agree with you," replied Dick, moving slowly along the margin of the torrent, which, on account of the unevenness of the ground, encroached at times and compelled them to retreat for a brief space; "I should think if they were alive they would call for help."

"Did you hear *me*?" asked McGovern, looking round in the face of his companion.

"Yes, though I happened to be quite near when the flood came, and had to scramble myself to get out of the way--"

"Hark!" interrupted McGovern, "that was a voice!"

"So it was, and it is below us!"

As he spoke he broke into a run, with the larger youth at his heels. They had caught a cry, but it was so smothered and brief that it was impossible to tell the point whence it came, except that it was below them.

"Help! help! for the love of Hiven, help!"

"That's the voice of Terry Hurley," said Dick, who recalled that the Irishman lived with his family a short distance away, and in the path of the flood. In the whirl of events young Halliard had forgotten this man and his wife and their two little girls.

But that cry showed they were in imminent extremity, and possibly aid might reach them in time. McGovern, since his own rescue, was as anxious as the brave Dick to extend assistance to whomsoever were in peril.

The calamity had come with such awful suddenness that not the least precautionary step could be taken. It was too early for neighbors to arrive, but all Piketon and the vicinity would be on the spot in the course of a few hours.

A brief run brought the boys in sight of the imperiled family. The humble home of Terry Hurley did not stand in the centre of the valley, like the tent of the Piketon Rangers, but well up to one side. Thus it escaped the full force of the current, which, however, was violent enough to fill the lower story in a twinkling, and threaten to carry the structure from its foundations.

The two little girls, Maggie and Katie, had just said their prayers at their bedside in the upper story, and Terry was in the act of lighting his pipe when the shock came. The husband and wife might have escaped by dashing out of the door and fleeing, but neither thought for an instant of doing so. Both would have preferred to perish rather than abandon the innocent ones above them.

Calling to his wife to follow, Terry bounded up a few steps and dashed to the bedside. At the same instant that he

seized one in his arms, his wife caught up the younger.

"Whither shall we go, Terry?" asked the distracted mother, starting to descend the stairs.

"Not there! not there!" he called, "but to the roof!"

By standing on a chair the trap-door was easily reached and the covering thrown back. Then he pushed Maggie through, warning her to hold fast, and the rest would instantly join her.

Next little Katie was passed upward.

"Now," said Terry, "I will jine the wee spalpeens and thin give ye a lift, Delia."

The Irishman was a powerful man, and the task thus far was of the easiest character. He drew himself through the door on the roof, and extending one brawny hand to his wife, was in the act of lifting her after him, when a scream from Maggie caused him to loose his hold and look round.

"What's the matter wid ye, Maggie?" he asked.

"Kate has just rolled off the roof!" was the terrifying reply.

CHAPTER XXIX--A SAD DISCOVERY

The horror-stricken Terry thought no more about his wife, whom he was in the act of lifting through the trap-door, but let go her hand, allowing her to drop with a crash that shook the whole building.

"Where is the child?" he asked, facing the elder daughter.

"Yonder; I was trying to hold her when she slipped away and rolled down the slope of the roof--"

But the father waited to hear no more. Just then the cry of his baby reached his ear, and he caught a glimpse of the white clothing which helped to buoy her up. Like an athlete, running along a spring-board to gather momentum for his tremendous leap, he took a couple of steps down the incline of the roof to the edge, from which he made a tremendous bound far out in the muddy torrent.

It was the energy of desperation and the delirium of paternal affection itself which carried him for a long way over the water, so that when he struck, one extended arm seized the shoulder of his child, while the other sustained both from sinking.

Poor Katie, who had been gasping for breath, now began crying, and the sound was welcome to the parent, for it proved that she was alive. Had she been quiet he would have believed she was drowned.

The trees which grew so thickly in the little valley served another good purpose in addition to that already named. The most powerful swimmer that ever lived could not make headway against such a torrent, nor indeed hold his own for a moment.

Terry would have been quickly swept beyond sight and sound of the rest of his family had he not grasped a strong, protruding limb by which he checked his progress.

"Are ye there, Terry?"

It was his wife who called. She had heard the frenzied cry of the elder girl at the moment she went downward herself with such a resounding crash. She was as frantic as her husband, and did that which would have been impossible at any other time. Grasping the sides of the trap-door, she drew herself upward and through with as much deftness as her husband a few minutes before. She asked the agonized question at the moment her head and shoulders appeared above the roof.

"Yis, I'm here, Delia," he called back, "and Katie is wid me."

"Hiven be praised!" was the fervent response of the wife; "I don't care now if the owld shanty is knocked into smithereens."

The speech was worthy of an Irishwoman, who never thought of her own inevitable fate in case the catastrophe named should overtake her dwelling while she was on the roof. She could dimly discern the figures of her husband and child, as the former clung to the friendly limb.

"If yer faat are risting so gintaaly on the ground," said the wife, who supposed for the moment he was standing on the earth and grasping the branch to steady himself, "why doesn't ye walk forward and jine us?"

"If my faat are risting on the ground!" repeated Terry: "and if I were doing the same, I would be as tall as a maating-house wid the staaple thrown in."

"Thin would ye loike to have us join ye?" persisted the wife.

"Arrah, Delia, now are ye gone clean crazy, that ye talks in that style? Stay where ye be, and I would be thankful if I could get back to ye, which the same I can't do."

The wife had been so flustered that her questions were a little mixed, but by the time she was fairly seated on the roof, with one arm encircling Maggie, who clung, frightened and crying, to her, she began to realize her situation.

"Terry," she called again, "are ye not comfortable?"

"Wal, yis," replied the fellow, whose waggery must show itself, now that he believed the entire family were safe from the flood, "I faals as comfortable, thank ye, as if I was standing on me head on the top of a barber's pole. How is it wid yerself, me jewel?"

"I'm thankful for the blissing of our lives; but why don't ye climb into the traa and take a seat?"

"I will do so in a few minutes."

There was good ground for this promise. Although Terry had been sustaining himself only a brief while, he felt the water rising so rapidly that the crown of his head, which was several inches below the supporting limb, quickly touched it, and as he shifted his position slightly it ascended still farther. While sustaining his child he could not lift both over the branch, but, with the help of the current, would soon be able to do so.

Requesting his wife to hold her peace for the moment, he seized the opportunity the instant it presented itself, and with comparatively little outlay of strength, placed himself astride the branch. This was all well enough, provided the flood did not keep on ascending, but it was doing that very thing, and his perch must speedily become untenable.

His refuge, however, was a sturdy oak, whose top was fully twenty feet above him, and, like its kind, was abundantly supplied with strong branches, so near each other that it was not difficult for the father to climb to a safe point, where he was confident the furious waters could never reach him.

Having seated himself in a better position than before, he surveyed his surroundings with some degree of composure.

"Delia," he called, "I obsarve ye are there yit."

"I'm thankful that yer words are the thruth, and if ye kaap on climbing ye'll be in the clouds by morning."

Now, while the rising torrent had proven of great assistance in one way to Terry and his infant child, it threatened a still graver peril to the mother and Maggie, who remained on the roof.

The house, being of wood, was liable to be lifted from its foundations and carried in sections down-stream. In that event it would seem that nothing could save the couple from immediate drowning.

Neither the husband nor wife thought of this calamity until she called out, under the stress of her new fear:

"Terry, the owld building can't stand this."

"What do ye maan, me darling?"

"I faal it moving under me as though its getting onaisy--oh! *we're afloat!*"

The exclamation was true. The little structure, after resisting the giant tugging at it as though it were a sentient thing, yielded when it could hold out no longer. It popped up a foot or two like a cork, as if to recover its gravity, and the next moment started down the torrent.

It was at this juncture that Terry uttered the despairing cry which brought Dick Halliard and Jim McGovern hurrying to the spot on the shore directly opposite.

But unexpected good fortune attended the shifting of the little building from its foundations. Swinging partly around, it drifted against the tree in which Terry had taken refuge with his child. His wife and Maggie were so near that he could touch them with his outstretched hand.

"Climb into the limbs," he said, "for the owld shebang will soon go to pieces."

He could give little help, since he had to keep one arm about Katie, but the wife was cool and collected, now that she fully comprehended her danger. The projecting limbs were within convenient reach, and it took her but a minute or two to ensconce herself beside her husband and other child.

Quick as was the action it was not a moment too soon, for she was hardly on her perch and safely established by the side of all that was dear to her when the house broke into a dozen fragments, the roof itself disintegrating, and every portion quickly vanished among the tree-tops in the darkness.

"Helloa, Terry, are you alive?" called Dick Halliard.

"We're all alive, Hiven be praised!" replied the Irishman, "and are roosting among the tree-tops."

"It will be all right with you then," was the cheery response, "for I don't think the flood will rise any higher."

"Little odds if it does, for we haven't raiched the top story of our new risidence yit."

Just then a dark object struck the ground at the feet of the boys, swinging around like a log of wood. Seeing what it was, Dick Halliard stooped down and drew it out of the current.

"What is it?" asked McGovern, in a whisper, seeing as he spoke that it was a human body. "Great Heavens! it is Tom Wagstaff!"

"So it is," replied Dick, "and he is dead."

"And so is Bobb Budd!"

CHAPTER XXX--A FRIEND INDEED

It was a shocking sight, and for a minute or two Dick Halliard and Jim McGovern did not speak.

Tom Wagstaff had been cut off in the beginning of his lawless career, and his dead body lay at the feet of his former companion in wrong-doing, with whom he had exchanged coarse jests but a short while before.

It was as McGovern declared, and as the reader has learned. When the Piketon Rangers heard the rush of the flood, each broke from the tent, thinking only of his own safety, which was just as well, since neither could offer the slightest aid to the others.

We have shown by what an exceedingly narrow chance McGovern eluded the torrent. But for the hand of Dick Halliard, extended a second time to save him from drowning, he would have shared the fate of Wagstaff. The particulars of the latter's death were never fully established. He probably fled in the same general direction as McGovern, without leading or following in his footsteps, since his body was carried to the same shore upon which McGovern emerged. His struggles most likely were similar, but, singularly enough, he knew nothing about swimming, which, after all, could have been of no benefit to him, and he perished as did the thousands who went down in the Johnstown flood.

Terry Hurley overheard the exclamation of McGovern, the roar of the torrent having greatly subsided, and he called out to know the cause. Dick explained, and the sympathetic Irishman instantly quelled the disposition to joke that he had felt a short time before.

The boys were not slow in observing that the water was falling. When they first laid down the body the current almost touched their feet. In a short while it was a considerable distance away.

"I believe he was an old friend of yours," said Dick, addressing his companion, who was deeply affected by the event.

"Yes," replied McGovern; "him and me run away from home together."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because Satan got into us; we both have good homes and kind parents, but we played truant, stole, fought, and did everything bad. Bob Budd came down to New York some time ago, and we made his acquaintance; we were fellows after one another's heart, and we took to each other right off. We showed Bob around the city, and then he made us promise to come out and visit him. It was his idea to form the Piketon Rangers."

"I don't know as there was anything wrong in that," said Dick, who felt for the grief of his companion and was awed by the fate that had overtaken the others; "camping out is well enough in its way, and I would do it myself if I had the chance."

"It isn't that which I mean; it's the way we have been going on since we have been together. I daresn't tell you all the bad we did, Dick Halliard."

"Never mind; don't think of it."

"I am going home as soon as I can; this will break up Tom's folks, for they thought all the world of him."

"It is bad," said Dick, who saw how idle it was to try to minify the dreadful incidents; "but sad as it is, it will not be entirely lost if you do not forget it."

"Forget it!" repeated McGovern, looking reproachfully in his face; "it will haunt me as long as I live."

"I have been told that people often feel that way when great sorrow overtakes them; but," added Dick, seeing his companion was grieved by his words, "I do not believe it will be so with you."

"I have run away from home before, but I think this was a little the worst, for my father had everything arranged to send me to college, and I know his heart is well-nigh broken."

"Not so far but that you can mend it by doing what you say you mean to do," said Dick, thinking it wise to emphasize the truth already spoken.

McGovern made no reply, but stood for a minute as if in deep thought. Dick was watching him closely and saw him look down at the inanimate form at his feet. He sighed several times, and then glancing up quickly, said in an eager voice:

"Dick Hilliard, I wish I was like you."

The words sounded strange from one who had been so reckless of all that was right, but never was an utterance more sincere--it came directly from the heart.

"Don't take me for a model, for you can be a great deal better than I; you tell me you have good parents; all you have to do is to obey them."

"You seem to doubt my keeping the pledge," said McGovern, looking with curious fixidity in the countenance of Dick.

"I believe you are in earnest now, but what I fear is that you have become so accustomed to your wild life that you will forget this lesson."

"Well," sighed the stricken youth, "that must remain to be tested; all that I can now do is to ask you to suspend judgment, as they say."

"You can give me your hand on it, Jim."

It was a strange sight, when the two boys clasped hands on the bank of the subsiding flood, with the lifeless body at their feet, and one of them uttered his solemn promise that from that hour he would strive to follow the right path and shun the wrong one.

But that pledge, uttered years ago, remains unbroken to this day.

Dick Halliard was thrilled by the scene, which will always remain vivid in his memory. Despite the sorrowful surroundings a singular pleasure crept through his being, for conscience whispered that he had done a good deed in thus exhorting the wayward youth, and that it was on record in the great book above.

It was not the impressiveness of that silent form that so wrought upon the feelings of the youths, but the recollection of the missing one, whose body they believed was whirling about in the fierce currents of the torrent that was speedily exhausting itself in the deeper parts of the valley, or perhaps was lodged somewhere in the lower limbs of a tree, awaiting the morning for the shocked friends to claim it.

Considerable time had passed since the bursting of the dam, and the news of the calamity spread rapidly. People began flocking hither from the neighborhood, and before long there were arrivals from Picketon itself. These gathered at the scene of destruction and viewed it with bated breath. Some brought lanterns, but the broad space where the waters had reposed for so many years was clearly shown in the moonlight and made a striking sight.

The striking feature about the calamity, which, as we have stated, was never satisfactorily explained, was that the dam, which looked strong enough to resist tenfold the pressure, had not yielded in a single spot, as would be supposed, but had been carried away almost bodily. That is to say, three-fourths of the structure was gone, its foundations being on a level with the bottom of the pond in the immediate vicinity.

Perhaps the most probable explanation of the accident was that offered by an old fisherman, to the effect that muskrats had burrowed under and through the dam until it had been so weakened throughout most of its extent that when a giving way began at one point it was like knocking the keystone from an arch. Its results resembled those often shown by the explosion of a steam boiler, when only a few fragments remain to show what it once has been.

Before long a party reached the place where Dick and Jim were standing by the dead body of Wagstaff. When it was proposed to remove it the suggestion was made that it should not be disturbed until the arrival of the coroner, who could be called by morning to view the body. This practice, as the reader doubtless knows, prevails in nearly every portion of the country, and was adopted in the instance named.

Meanwhile Terry Hurley and his family, perched among the branches of the trees, were not forgotten. As soon as the waters subsided sufficiently, parties waded out, and by means of ladders that were quickly brought, soon placed the homeless ones safely on *terra firma*.

The haste of the flight had prevented the couple from doing much in the way of bringing needed garments, and the children, who were in their night clothes, suffered considerably. But they were now in the hands of good friends, who did everything possible. They were looked after, and it is a pleasure to say that no serious consequences followed.

Captain Jim Budd, the indulgent uncle of Bob, happened to be away from Picketon on the night of the great accident, but was expected back in the morning. Fortunately no one was so thoughtless as to hasten to Aunt Ruth with the news of her nephew's death, and therein she was more favored than most people placed in her sad situation.

Dick Halliard made his employer his confidant as far as was necessary concerning Jim McGovern. The good-hearted merchant took hold of the matter at once.

Having obtained from McGovern the address of Wagstaff's parents, word was telegraphed them and their wishes asked as to the disposition of their son's remains. The father appeared that afternoon, and with the permission of the coroner took charge of them.

Mr. Wagstaff proved to be a man of good sense and judgment. He told Mr. Hunter that his life purpose had been to educate and bring up his five children, with every advantage they could require. He and his wife had set their hearts on preparing Jim for the ministry, but his wayward tendencies developed at an early age. He was the only one of the family to cause the parents anxiety, and he brought them enough sorrow for all.

This parent was one of those rare ones who saw his children as other people saw them. His boy had been as bad as he could be, and though the youngest of the three, no excuse was offered for him on that account.

"He has sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind," remarked the father; "he chose the wrong path instead of the right, and no one is blamable beside himself."

Mr. Wagstaff manifested deep interest in young McGovern, when he learned what the young man had said to Dick Halliard. His father was a prominent lawyer in New York, who had cherished the same hopes for his son as he, but he would not be controlled, and he, too, had run off to seek forbidden pleasures.

But the caller was touched by what he had heard as to the youth's change of feelings. He sought him out, and was pleased with his talk. The same train which bore the remains of Wagstaff to New York carried also Jim McGovern on his way to join his parents who had known nothing of him for days.

CHAPTER XXXI--DICK HALLIARD IS ASTOUNDED

There were hopes until the following morning that Bob Budd might have escaped the flood. The fact that one of the Picketon Rangers had managed with help to extricate himself gave slight grounds for belief that a second had been equally fortunate.

This hope grew less and less as the night passed, and the people wandering up and down the valley, hallooing and calling the name of Bob, received no response. Only a few retained the slightest expectation of ever seeing him again.

Long before morning broke the flood had spent its force. Such a vast outlet as the sweeping away of most of the bank was like the sliding doors which admit passengers to the ferryboat. It was of such extent that the supply quickly ran out.

In the middle of the valley, where the whole force of the torrent was felt, large trees had been uprooted and hurled forward with a momentum which helped to uproot others in turn.

The prodigious power rapidly diminished as the ground rose on either side, until it was seen that the trunks were able to hold their own. There was considerable dislocation of vegetation, so to speak, but nothing to be compared to that in the middle of the valley.

The sheet of water had been plentifully stocked with fish, which were now scattered everywhere along the valley, napping in little pools of water as they did on the muddy bottom of the pond itself. It was a veritable picnic for the small boys.

Captain Jim Budd was on the ground as soon after he heard of the loss of Bob as he could reach the place. He was thoughtful enough to arrange matters so that his wife should learn nothing of the occurrence until his return. He placed a trusted friend on guard to keep busy mongers from her.

Captain Jim was the contrast of Mr. Wagstaff as regarded the youth in whom he was interested. He proclaimed to every one that Bob was not only the brightest, but the best principled boy in Picketon and the neighborhood. Had he lived he would have made his mark in the law or ministry or whatever profession he chose to honor with his attention. He had always been truthful, honest, and obedient, and his loss was in the nature of a general calamity.

It seems incredible that a man of sense should talk in this fashion, and not only utter such words, but believe them. The reader, however, who has heard other parents talk, can credit the statement that such was the fact.

The first thing that Captain Jim did, after learning the facts, was to offer a reward of one thousand dollars for the recovery of the body of his nephew. No doubt, he said, the whole neighborhood would insist on attending his remains to the grave, that they might render a fitting tribute to one thus cut off in the prime of his promising young manhood. The Captain, therefore, felt it his duty to defer to so proper a desire. He would erect a monument over the remains, to which parents might impressively point, as they urged their offspring to emulate the virtues of Robert Budd.

The large reward offered for the recovery of the body resulted in the employment of fully a hundred and sometimes more people, who roamed up and down the narrow valley through which the flood had swept from early morning until darkness forced a cessation of the search.

Some three miles below the bursted dam the valley widened to fully double its width. There naturally the current expanded and lost the tremendous power displayed above. Most of this portion, like the rest, was covered with trees, so that places innumerable existed where a body might be hidden, thus making it almost impossible to find it unless by a fortunate accident.

The surprise was general that the search should be prosecuted so long and so thoroughly without result. It seemed that every foot of ground had been covered and no spot left unvisited. The bushy tops of trees, prostrate trunks, timbers, undergrowth, shrubbery, rifts of leaves, and, indeed, everything that looked as if it could hide a body as large as a dog were examined again and again, but without the slightest success.

An excitement was roused by the report, the second day after the search had been instituted, that the body had been recovered, but it proved to be the remains of a heifer that was unfortunately caught in the swirl and was unable to save herself.

Gradually the belief spread that Bob Budd's remains would never be found, and most of the searchers gave up the task. A few, prompted by the promise of a still larger reward, kept at it, hoping that some lucky chance might give them the opportunity to earn more money than they could do otherwise in several years.

The disappointment was a sorrowful one to Captain Jim Budd and his wife Ruth, the news having been broken to the latter. They could not reconcile themselves to the thought that their beloved nephew should be denied the last rites that were paid to the humblest individual; and while all knew the character of the missing young man, they deeply pitied his relatives.

Dick Halliard returned to his duties in the store of Mr. Hunter more thoughtful than ever before. He was grateful that McGovern had shown so strong a resolution of reforming his life and turning from his evil ways, but it was shocking to recall that Wagstaff and Bob Budd were placed beyond the power of undoing the evil they had committed.

Bob, as we have shown, was a native of Piketon, and had spent most of his life there. He was an only son, who was left a considerable fortune by his father, who appointed Uncle Jim Budd his guardian. This old gentleman, though he sometimes flared up and threatened Bob because of his extravagance and waywardness, was foolishly indulgent. Whatever firmness he might have shown at times in dealing with his nephew was spoiled by his wife, who refused the young man nothing that was in her power to grant. Bob was not naturally vicious, and his relatives were largely responsible for his going wrong.

One cause for deep satisfaction on the part of Dick was the wonderful proof of the truth of the words spoken by Dr. Armstrong, when the youth summoned him hastily to the bedside of his parent. From that evening there was a marked improvement in his condition, and his convalescence was steady until, in the course of a few months, he was completely restored to health and vigor.

After thinking over the question for a day or two, Dick decided to tell his parents everything. They had learned of what had occurred, and he believed it would be a pleasure to them to be told that one result of the blow was the reformation of McGovern.

Such was the fact, but the greatest happiness that could come to the father and mother was that of learning the nobility of their boy, who had conducted himself so admirably through more than one crisis, more trying than most youths older than he are ever called upon to face.

Matters stood thus at the end of a week after the flood, when Dick Halliard was surprised by the reception of a letter from New York. He did not recognize the handwriting, and broke the seal with no little curiosity. A glance at the bottom of the page showed the name of Jim McGovern as the writer.

"My dear Dick," he said, after giving the particulars of the funeral over the remains of Wagstaff, "I can never tell you how deeply grateful I am to you; I am not one of those who gush, and will not say more except to repeat a remark which my father made when I had told him all. 'There is no earthly honor,' said he, 'which could be given me, that I would not surrender for the sake of having a son like Richard Halliard.' Considered strictly as a compliment, I think you will admit, Dick, that *that* has some weight. I know your modesty, but I must beg you as a favor to me to read all my letter up to this point, when you must stop, for here comes something which is a secret for the present between you and me. You will not give a hint of it to any one.

"Come to think, however, there is no secret that I'm going to reveal in the letter, but I will tell you the next time we meet that will make your hair lift your hat. I want you to get permission right away from Mr. Hunter to come to New York for a couple of days. Telegraph me what time you will reach here, and I will meet you at the station and take you home. If anything should happen to prevent my being there on time come to No. -- Madison Avenue, give your name, and wait for me. My folks will be delighted to receive you, and you will not be kept long waiting.

"I have arranged to enter Yale at the next term. I shall need to brush up in my studies, but I'm confident I'll get there all the same, if you'll excuse a little slang which still clings to me. But above all things, come to New York *as soon as you can*. I promise you will not regret it."

As may be supposed, Dick Halliard found more than one cause for surprise in this letter. The first was the fact that the writer possessed a much better education than he suspected. The composition was not only correct as regards grammar, punctuation, and spelling, but the statement of his decision to enter Yale College showed the advantages the youth had received, and which were far superior to what would be supposed by one who heard McGovern discourse when a member of the Piketon Rangers.

But Dick was shrewd, and, although he respected the request of the writer that nothing should be revealed about the letter, he suspected the nature of the "secret" to which he referred in such strong language.

"Jim is in the flush of a mistaken sense of gratitude to me," he said to himself, "and he has persuaded his father to feel very much the same way. They want to get me down there to their home, that they may all see and tell me how thankful they are, and perhaps they mean to make me a present of some kind. I don't think I'll go."

Nothing could be more distasteful to young Halliard than a proceeding of the kind he had in mind. It is no misstatement to say that he would have preferred to receive personal chastisement to that of being made a lion of by any one.

And yet he disliked to disappoint Jim, who was so strenuous in his invitation. He would be grieved and repeat it more urgently than before until further refusal would offend him.

"I'll go!" finally concluded the youth, "but I will give Jim to understand from the beginning that, if he attempts to show me off or to tell others anything about me, or tries to force a testimonial on me, I will take the next train home and forever afterward keep him at arm's length."

With this resolution in his mind, he went to Mr. Hunter's private office and asked him whether he could be spared from the store a couple of days.

"We should miss you at *any* time," said the genial merchant, resting his hand affectionately on his shoulder; "but there is no request that Richard Halliard can make of me which I will not cheerfully grant if it is in my power to do so. Yes, take a couple of days off, and a week if you wish, and may you have as good a time as you deserve, young man."

Dick blushed under this warm compliment, and, thanking his employer, went home, where he told his parents of McGovern's request, and secured their consent to his departure.

Jim met him at the station with a carriage, and drove him hurriedly homeward. After the warm greeting Dick wanted to warn him about the lion and testimonial business, but reflected that it would be in bad taste, since it was possible that Jim held no such intentions. In that event he would resemble the politician who declines the honor that has never been offered him.

McGovern seemed restless and uneasy on the way, often forcing an unnatural gayety, which did not deceive his friend, of whom he showed such extreme fondness.

Dick admired the handsome residence before which the carriage halted, and it was with considerable awe that he followed Jim up the broad stone steps, and was ushered into his father's library. McGovern showed commendable taste in not presenting his visitor to the members of the household immediately on his arrival.

"But I have a friend in the library," he said, as he led the way thither; "that I think you will be glad to meet."

A young man rose to his feet, and came briskly forward.

"How are you, Dick?"

"Heaven save me!" gasped Dick Halliard, in amazement, recognizing the smiling youth as no other than Bob Budd himself!

CHAPTER XXXII--HOW IT HAPPENED

When the terrific roar of waters reached the ears of the three Picketon Rangers in their tent, McGovern and Wagstaff started at headlong speed up the right side of the valley toward higher ground, the former succeeding in saving himself with the help of Dick Halliard, while the latter lost his life.

Bob Budd turned the opposite way, impelled only by the wild desire to escape, with little hope of doing so. But fortune was kinder to him than to his companions. Had they followed his footsteps they would have been saved with little difficulty, for the ground on that side was not only freer from undergrowth, but rose so much more rapidly than that on the opposite slope that his efforts kept him ahead of the torrent, and he struck the level ground where it was untouched by the flood.

But Bob was in a panic, and instead of waiting to see how his friends made out, he broke into a run that was never stopped until, panting and tired, he could barely stand. He was near his own home, and sat down to reflect upon the situation.

He was clear of one danger, but he believed he was in another equally to be dreaded. In fact, although he repressed all signs of the agitation at the time, he was as uncomfortable as can be imagined while talking with his companions before the giving way of the mill-dam.

He believed that Dick Halliard was sure to make known his attack on him. It was so flagrant in its nature that imprisonment was inevitable, for when he came to think over the matter he lost his faith in a triumphant alibi. He knew that Dick Halliard's simple assertion would outweigh all the perjuries he and his companions could utter.

It was a fearful prospect, and Bob felt he could not face it. There was but one escape that presented itself--that was flight.

Everything pointed to this as a successful recourse. The people would believe he was drowned in the flood, as he believed Wagstaff and McGovern had already been, and therefore they would not dream of looking elsewhere. If he could get out of the neighborhood without being recognized he would be safe.

He resolved to do so. Knowing that his uncle was absent, he managed to climb into the rear of his own home without discovery. Making his way to his room without disturbing any one, he changed his clothing, putting on a slouch hat, which could be pulled down over his face so as to hide most of his features. Then, drawing up the collar of his coat, he sneaked out again by the way he had entered without his presence having been suspected by his aunt or any of the servants.

Bob always had abundance of money at command, so no inconvenience was likely to result from lack of funds. It was three miles to the nearest railroad station, but the walk was not a trying one on this cool night in autumn, and he easily made it.

Luck was certainly with the young scapegrace on that eventful evening. The hour was so late that he encountered only one person on the road. He was an old farmer, so tipsy that he would not have recognized his own mother in broad daylight. He paid no attention to the solitary figure on the highway, with his slouch hat drawn far down over his face and his collar about his ears, as though it were midwinter.

Reaching the station just as the night express was starting, he leaped upon the rear platform without stopping to purchase a ticket, and thus escaped another danger of recognition. He saw no one in the car that he knew, and the conductor who collected his fare was also a stranger.

Thus Bob succeeded in getting away from Picketon without a living person suspecting the fact.

Arriving in the metropolis he went to the Astor House, where he registered under an assumed name. He had been in New York before, and breathed somewhat freely, believing that the great city offered better facilities for concealment from the authorities than can be found in the fastnesses of the Rocky Mountains.

Conscience makes cowards of us all, and Bob could never feel perfectly secure. He feared every stranger whom he encountered on the streets and who looked sharply at him was an officer that suspected his identity and was meditating his arrest.

Even when he read in the papers the account of the disaster at Picketon, and saw the name of Wagstaff and himself as the two worthy young men that were drowned, he failed to obtain the consolation that might have been expected. He was known to a good many in New York, and feared he could not keep his secret much longer.

In this distressful state he dispatched a messenger boy to the home of Jim McGovern, with the request that he would come to a certain room at the Astor House to meet a person on important business. Bob did not send a note or give his name, so that when the wondering Jim presented himself at the famous hostelry, it was without the remotest suspicion of whom he was to meet.

Possibly the amazement of McGovern may be imagined when he stood in the presence of the former captain of the Picketon Rangers and listened to his story.

"I have a great mind to sail for Europe," he said, after making the facts known.

"And why?"

"Because I'll never be safe as long as I'm on this side of the Atlantic; my attack on Dick Halliard will send me to prison for twenty years."

The frightened Bob now gave Jim a truthful account of his stopping young Halliard on the highway and shooting at him.

"Have you told your uncle and aunt that you are here?" asked McGovern, without referring to the incident, which, of course, he heard for the first time.

"Gracious, no!" replied the startled Bob; "I wouldn't do it for the world."

"Don't you think you can trust them?"

"I know they would do anything for me, but it is too risky; they would be sure to drop some hint that would let the cat out of the bag."

"You needn't be afraid of that; haven't you reflected, Bob, how distressed they are over your supposed death?"

"Yes, that is so, but I don't know how it can be helped; you see how I am fixed."

"You are mistaken, and before I can agree to stand by you I must insist that you write a letter to your uncle, Captain Jim, and let him know that the thousand dollars he has offered for the recovery of your body is safe. You can ask that until he hears from you again he and Aunt Ruth shall let no one suspect you are alive. You know he believes in you, and you have only to say that you have important reasons for the request, and they will be sure to respect it."

"I wish I could feel as certain about that as you do," said Bob, who was made uncomfortable by the words of his friend.

"I am certain, and I can't feel much sympathy for you as long as you show yourself indifferent to the feelings of your best friends."

"That's queer talk for you, Jim; you didn't think much about the feelings of your folks when you and Tom run away from home."

"I trust I am a different person from what I was then," said Jim, his face flushing.

Bob looked at him curiously, but did not speak the thought which came into his mind at that moment.

"Well," said he, with a sigh, "if you insist so strongly, why, I'll do it."

"When?"

"In the course of a day or two."

"I want you to do it *now*, while I am in this room."

"But where's the hurry, Jim?" asked Bob, impatiently; "I don't see why things need be rushed in the style you want."

"Do it to oblige me, Bob, and then I have something to say to you which is of importance and which will please you."

"Let me hear it now," said Bob, brightening up with expectancy.

"You sha'n't hear a word till after the letter is written."

The task was distasteful to young Budd, and he held off for awhile longer, but Jim would not let up. He was determined that the letter should be written in his presence and before he went away.

Seeing there was no escape, Bob turned to the stand containing writing material, and addressed a brief note to his uncle, giving him the important information that he had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from the flood that drowned one of his companions and came mighty near carrying off the other.

The main portion of the letter was taken up with an emphatic request of his uncle and aunt not to give the slightest hint of what they had learned until they heard further from him.

This letter was sealed and directed.

"Let me have it," said Jim.

"What for?"

"I will drop it in the letter box as I go out."

"Well, you beat the bugs," laughed Bob, passing the missive over to him; "now, what have you to tell me?"

It may be added that Bob Budd's letter promptly reached the astounded Captain, who found it hard to keep the joyful news to himself, but he managed to do so, as did his wife, who went into hysterics when the news was first broken to her.

But, as a means of averting suspicion, the Captain immediately doubled the reward offered for the recovery of the body of his nephew. He smiled grimly as he did so, and looked upon the matter as a capital joke; but then some people do entertain peculiar ideas as to what constitutes a joke.

CHAPTER XXXIII--CONCLUSION

Jim McGovern now gave the particulars of his own escape through the help of Dick Halliard, and of their memorable interview on the border of the rushing flood, with the body of Tom Wagstaff lying at their feet. Bob listened with deep interest until he had finished, and then shook his head.

"It beats anything I ever knew or heard tell of; but I don't feel safe now that Halliard has the grip on me."

"Of course, he told me nothing about that affair; but, since he got so much the best of it, I'm sure he will be satisfied to let it go no further. I'll guarantee it," added McGovern, with a glowing face.

"I don't see how you can do that; but I'm inclined to believe you can make it right with Dick."

"Of course I can; such a fellow as he is will do anything in the world for you."

But Bob was not free from misgiving. He had dwelt upon the troublesome matter until he had grown morbid. It assumed a magnitude in his mind beyond the truth.

"What are you going to do, Jim?"

"If I live I shall enter Yale College at the next term, and try to be something that my folks won't be ashamed of."

"Whew! but that's a big flop for you, and you will lose a mighty deal of fun by trying to be good."

"You can have tenfold more than by the other way; I haven't tried it long, it is true, but I have felt more genuine pleasure during these few days than I ever knew in all my life; it will be the same with you."

Bob Budd sat silent a moment, looking out of the window. He had given the same important subject a great deal of thought during the few days that he imagined so many of those whom he met were hunting for him, but the restraining power in his case was that he saw no safe way by which to turn the sharp corner. So long as he was in danger of being arrested so long he must remain a fugitive.

Now the whole case was changed. He knew, despite the doubts he had expressed, that Dick Halliard could be relied upon, and that not the slightest risk was run in trusting to his honor.

"Well, Jim," he said, after his brief silence, "*I'll try it.*"

The other extended his hand, and they shook cordially.

"That's settled!" said McGovern, with much emphasis. He was wise enough to refrain from any sermon, or disquisition upon the rewards that were sure to accompany such a step. Bob understood the matter as well as he did, and therefore needed no enlightenment. His friend never displayed more admirable tact than he did by treating the mental debate of the other as ended beyond all possibility of reopening. He showed no doubt in his own mind, though, truth to tell, he was not wholly free from misgiving.

"Now," added Bob, with a laugh, "I suppose your next order will be for me to go back to Piketon."

"I don't know that there is anything better for you to do; but I have been thinking that it might be better to bring Dick Halliard to New York, that we can talk the whole thing over and reach a full understanding before you return."

"That suits me better."

"Our folks are anxious to meet him, for I have told them so many things about him that he has become quite a hero in their eyes. And then there's another matter that I want to speak to you about," added Jim, rising from his chair, opening the door and peering into the hall, as if he feared that some one might overhear his words.

"There's no danger of anything like that," said Bob, with a laugh; "we are not of enough importance to have any one listening at the keyhole to catch our words."

"I don't know about that," replied Jim, with an air so mysterious that the curiosity of his friend was aroused. "I guess I'll risk it; but no one knows of it beside father and mother."

And then Jim, in a guarded undertone, made known another momentous secret, while his companion sat with open mouth and staring eyes listening to his words. He did not speak until he had finished and turned upon him with the question:

"What do you think of *that*, Bob?"

"I agree with you; I'll stand by you to the end; but what about Dick's visit to New York?"

"I'll write to him now and mail both letters as I go out."

"Don't give him a hint about *me*," cautioned Bob, as the other placed himself at the table.

The letter, whose contents have already been known to the reader, was written in the room of the Astor House where the other to Captain Budd was formulated. Then Jim placed the two in his pocket and rose to go.

"Won't you come and stay at our house?" he asked of Bob.

"Thanks, no; I'll remain here; you can understand that it would be a little embarrassing to meet your folks just now. When matters are straightened out I will give you a call, and you will come down and spend a week or two at Picketon."

"That's a bargain, provided it is not in the character of a Picketon Ranger," replied Jim, with a laugh.

Shaking the hand of his friend he took his departure.

That afternoon when Bob strolled up Broadway, he reflected that it was the most enjoyable hour he had spent since his visit to the metropolis. He feared no one now, and his future was brighter than he ever dreamed it could be.

When the telegram from Dick Halliard reached Jim McGovern, making known on what train he would reach New York, he drove down to the Astor House and took Bob to his own home, where he left him in the library while he hastened to the station for Dick.

We have already given a hint about their meeting, when Dick received the greatest shock in all his life. For a few minutes he doubted his own senses, but that it was the real Bob Budd before him he was compelled to admit, after shaking his hand, looking in his laughing face, and hearing his voice.

The three sat for a couple of hours discussing the subject which was nearest to each one's heart. Then Jim took his two friends out riding in the Park, for it happened to be one of the most delightful of autumn days. In the evening the family of Mr. McGovern made the acquaintance of Dick and Bob, and the three visited a place of entertainment.

The McGoverns insisted on Dick spending a week with them, but, though it would have given him rare pleasure to do so, he felt that he ought to return at the end of the time he had named to Mr. Hunter. His friends finally compromised by allowing him to go, with the understanding that he was to pay the visit during the holidays. Dick promised that if it lay in his power he would do so.

The visit was made as per programme.

Bob decided to stay in New York for several days, until the excitement of his disappearance had time to subside. It was agreed that Dick on his return should make known the astonishing news to the people in Picketon, that they might not be frightened out of their wits when they encountered him on the street.

"I don't know how to fix it with them," said Bob, "and I will leave it with you, Dick; your head is plumb, and you may be able to get up some story which, while true, don't give me away too bad."

"I'll do my best," said Dick, as he bade his friends good-bye for a brief while.

Upon reaching Picketon, Dick, after reporting at home, called on Captain Jim and Aunt Ruth, whom he told of his meeting with their nephew in New York. He brought a message to the effect that he would soon be with them, and they were at liberty to make known all he had told them, adding, by way of explanation, that he left for New York on the evening of the flood on important business, which would soon be finished, when he would be among them again. He had read in the papers an account of the disaster, and was extremely sorry to learn of poor Wagstaff's death. He hoped all his friends would overlook his failure to notify them more promptly that he was alive and well.

This was the story told by the captain and by Dick Halliard, and though it was far from revealing everything, it cannot be said that it partook of the nature of a falsehood.

On the second day after Dick's return, a small box arrived by express for Dick Halliard. When the wondering lad opened it he found within a magnificent gold watch and chain. On the former was engraved the following inscription:

"From Bob and Jim,
TO THEIR BEST FRIEND
Dick Halliard.
WE ARE ALL NOW FELLOW-TRAVELERS
ALONG THE RIGHT PATH."

And that was the secret of the mysterious communication of Jim McGovern to Bob Budd in the room of the latter at the Astor House.

COMRADES TRUE
OR
PERSEVERANCE VS. GENIUS
by Edward S. Ellis, A. M.
Author of "Among the Esquimaux," "The Campers Out," etc.
320 Pages, Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25

In following the career of two friends from youth to manhood, this popular author weaves a narrative of intense and at times thrilling interest. One of the boys is endowed with brilliant talents, is quick and impulsive, but after a few efforts is easily discouraged. The other possessing only ordinary ability, is resolute and persevering, overcoming all obstacles in his path until success is attained.

This story possesses the usual exciting and interesting experiences that occur in the lives of all bright and active youths. In point of incident it is rather more than ordinarily realistic, as the two heroes in their experiences pass through the recent calamitous forest fires in northern Minnesota, and barely escape with their lives.

The perusal of this story will not only prove fascinating, but its teaching will encourage young men to depend for success in life upon patience and perseverance in right paths, rather than upon great natural gifts, real or fancied.

Sold by all booksellers, or sent, prepaid, upon receipt of price.
The Penn Publishing Company
923 Arch Street, Philadelphia

AMONG THE ESQUIMAUX
OR
ADVENTURES UNDER THE ARCTIC CIRCLE
by Edward S. Ellis, A. M.
Author of "The Campers Out," Etc
317 pages, Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25

The incidents of this interesting story are laid in Greenland amid the snows, the glaciers, and the barren regions which have engaged the attention of explorers and navigators for centuries past.

The main interest of the story centres about two bright boys whose desire for discovery sometimes leads them into dangerous positions. They visit an iceberg, and, while making a tour about it, their boat slips away from her moorings. After a number of adventures, they are finally rescued by a native Esquimau. With him and an old sailor who accompanied them to the iceberg, they go on a hunting expedition into the interior of Greenland, and there they have a number of most thrilling and exciting experiences, but none result seriously, and the whole party is eventually restored to home and friends.

The story is sure to prove interesting to any reader, and the moral tone pervading it is such as will meet the approval of all parents.

Sold by all booksellers, or sent, prepaid, upon receipt of price.
The Penn Publishing Company
923 Arch Street, Philadelphia

ANDY'S WARD
OR
THE INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM
by James Otis
Author of "The Braganza Diamond," "Chasing a Yacht," etc.
358 Pages, Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25

A peculiarly fascinating narrative of the life and experiences of "Museum Marvels." They dwell in a house owned by a sword-swallower, whose wife, the "Original Circassian," is entrusted with its management. But one of the company, a dwarf, nicknamed the "Major," insists upon taking charge, and the rest of the household, including a fat lady, a giant, and a snake-charmer, stand more in awe of him than of the owner of the house or his wife.

Two boys, Andy and Jerry, are employed to wait upon this queerly assorted family. Their troubles with the dwarf and his pets, during which the boys are aided and counseled by the giant, make up the lighter portion of the story. A tiny girl, who is even more of a dwarf than the "Major," is introduced to the household by Andy, who claims her as his ward, by virtue of a promise made to her brother when he was dying.

The private life of the marvels, their amusements, their wrangles, especially the laughable encounters between the "Giant" and the "Major," form a most interesting story.

Sold by all booksellers, or sent, prepaid, upon receipt of price.
The Penn Publishing Company
923 Arch Street, Philadelphia

CHASING A YACHT

by James Otis

Author of "The Braganza Diamond," "Andy's Ward," etc.
350 pages, Illustrated. Cloth, \$1.25

Two boys have engaged to run a steam yacht for the double purpose of pleasure and profit, and after carefully fitting her up they launch her, only to find the next morning that she is gone--stolen--as they later discover, by two other boys who had been refused a half-interest in her. The rightful owners start in hot pursuit, and in an attempt to recapture the steamer are themselves made prisoners. It is the intention of the thieves to hold the owners prisoners until the Hudson River is reached and then put them ashore, but their plans miscarry owing to the intervention of two rather rough citizens who find their way aboard the yacht and make themselves generally at home. Fortunately one of the owners manages to effect his escape, and gaining the assistance of the authorities the little vessel is speedily restored to them.

The story is full of adventure, and the heroes are both bright and manly fellows, who make the best of their temporary hardships. The story will be found to enlist the interest at the outset, and to hold it until the last page is turned.

Sold by all booksellers, or sent, prepaid, upon receipt of price.
The Penn Publishing Company
923 Arch Street, Philadelphia