

FICTION

Frank Gee Patchin

The Pony Rider Boys on the Blue Ridge

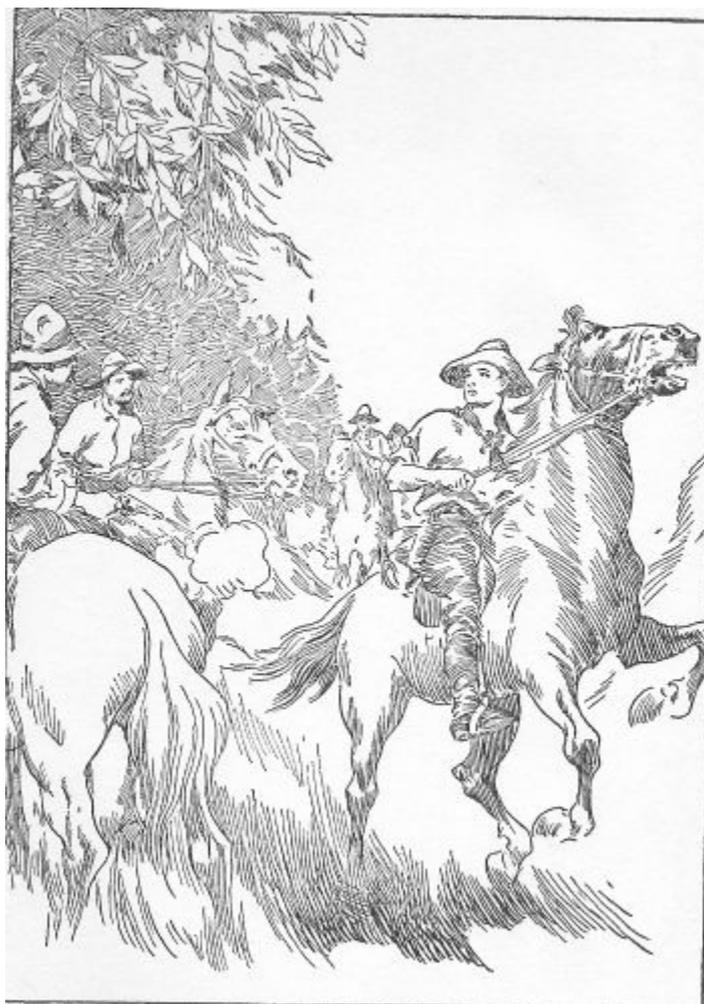
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FICTION



Frontispiece: Tad's Pony Leaped into the Air

The Pony Rider Boys on the Blue Ridge

or

A Lucky Find in the Carolina Mountains

by

Frank Gee Patchin

Author of *The Pony Rider Boys in the Rockies*, *The Pony Rider Boys in Texas*, *The Pony Rider Boys in Montana*, *The Pony Rider Boys in the Ozarks*, *The Pony Rider Boys in the Alkali*, *The Pony Rider Boys in New Mexico*, *The Pony Rider Boys in the Grand Canyon*, *The Pony Rider Boys with the Texas Rangers*, etc., etc.

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CHAPTER I

THE CAMP IN SMOKY PASS

"Now let the flies, the hornets, the fleas and the doodle bugs come and do their worst," declared Tad Butler, standing off to take a look at the tent he had just finished pitching.

"No doodle bugs in mine, if you please," answered Stacy Brown.

"Nor mine," added Ned Rector and Walter Perkins in chorus.

"How about you, Chops? Do you like bugs?" questioned Tad, giving the guide a mischievous glance.

"Yassir."

"You do?"

"Yassir. Nassir."

"Well, which is it?"

"Yassir."

"I thought not," nodded Tad. "Chops doesn't always know what he does want."

"Yassir."

"I reckon we'll have to give him a few lessons," suggested Chunky Brown with a grin.

"Yassir," replied Chops, regarding Chunky with large eyes.

"So long as you are willing, there seems to be nothing more to be said at the present sitting," observed Ned Rector.

"You're a cheerful idiot, aren't you, Chops?" persisted Stacy.

"Yassir."

"Isn't it fine to have a guide who agrees with everything you say?" scoffed Ned. "I'm afraid we're going to have a quiet time of it down here in the Blue Ridge with a guide who won't oppose you, not a person to fight you, not even an animal to do battle with," mourned Ned.

"I guess you will find animals enough when we get in farther," answered Tad with a laugh.

"What kind?" demanded Ned, instantly on the alert.

"Deer, bear and mountain lion."

"I--I caught a mountain lion up in the Grand Canyon," interposed Chunky.

"Yes, we know all about that."

"We certainly do, don't we, Chunky?" laughed Tad.

"I reckon if we don't, no one does," finished Chunky, directing a look of inquiry at the guide.

"Yassir," agreed Chops, grinning broadly.

"Chops," it may be well to explain, was not only colored, but he was black as a piece of ebony, which, however, did not account for his peculiar nickname. Chops's right name was Billy Veal. The boys seized upon this to call him Veal Chops, which after a few hours was changed to the short form, or "Chops." And Chops, Billy would remain as long as he traveled the Blue Ridge in the company of these fun-loving young fellows.

Chops's lips were red and his mouth looked like an angry gash, while the eyes at times appeared to be all whites.

Professor Zeppelin had attached Chops to his party at Asheville. The colored man had been recommended as an excellent guide, one who knew every foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains and their various branches. Besides this, the Professor's informant said that Billy Veal was a splendid cook, a useful man about the stock, and possessing numerous other qualifications. What the informant did not say was that, while Billy may have known how to do all these things, he was loath to do anything that might be construed as work. Besides this, his appetite was greater than Stacy Brown's, which was saying a great deal for Billy. Veal's appetite was, in fact, assuming alarming proportions. The party feared that they should not be able to keep themselves supplied with food unless something were done to check the growing appetite of the guide and all-around man.

The Professor was looking on admiringly as Tad finished pitching the tents, Veal watching the work with wide, white eyes. Stacy took a piece of hardtack which he tossed to the waiting colored man, and the hardtack instantly went into Chops's mouth. For a second it puffed out his cheek, then disappeared down his throat whole, as the guide gave a convulsive gulp.

Stacy Brown regarded the fellow admiringly.

"Goodness gracious! I wish I could stow away food like that. Did you ever eat on a wager, Chops?"

"Yassir."

"What did you do?"

"I done et six pies while de clock was strikin' twelve, sah."

"Six pies?" marveled the fat boy.

"Yassir."

"Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha! You must have been a regular turn-over."

"Yassir."

"Were you full?" asked Tad.

"Nassir. I could hab done et some more."

"Chunky, you ought to take lessons from Chops. He might give you some valuable pointers," suggested Tad laughingly.

"I reckon he could at that," agreed the fat boy. "If I could eat six pies all at once, without having to send for the doctor, I'd think I was some pumpkins."

"Especially if you had been eating pumpkin pies, eh?" chuckled Tad Butler.

"Tad, I like your tent arrangement first rate," complimented Professor Zeppelin surveying the little white canvas tents that were ranged in a semicircle about the campfire, all opening to the fire. "I am inclined to think, too, that you have an invention worth while in what we have named the 'Butler Lean-to.' I am sure others will recognize the value of it and that it will come into quite general use."

"Thank you. I shall be glad if others find it useful. However, we have not tried it out. We'll see how it works with us during this journey through the Blue Ridge," answered Tad.

Tad Butler's tent was an ingenious little affair. It weighed just five pounds, and when packed, it folded into a neat little package five inches thick by ten by fourteen inches. One might carry it on his back without discomfort.

To put up such a tent you cut three slender saplings of about ten feet long, slip one down the ridge of the tent and out through a hole in the back. Shove the end of this pole into the ground, cross and spread the other two poles, and tie the three together at the upper ends. Next raise the ridge-pole by sticking the other two into the ground to make a triangle. Peg down the sides, tie out the front poles at the grommets, and your tent is ready for occupancy, having taken not more than seven or eight minutes in the putting up. After finishing, the tent makes a peculiar appearance, being about two feet wide at the rear, by a full eight feet at the front. The rear of the tent is used for the storing of equipment or "duffle" as the camper calls it.

Tad arranged two beds in his tent, leaving the others to fix their own as suited their individual tastes. The beds were made by first clearing away the ground, then piling in hemlock boughs fully three feet deep. Over this was placed the sleeping bag, and no softer bed ever held a tired camper. The bed had also the merit of raising one from the ground, out of the water, provided there should be rain in the night.

The others of this party of young explorers were satisfied to dump their sleeping bags on the ground, though the Professor did make a bed for himself, which, while not so practical as Tad's, served his purpose almost equally well.

"You fellows had better get yourselves off the ground, for we are going to have a storm tonight," advised Butler.

"Walter is sleeping in my tent, but the rest of you look out. Don't you think it's going to storm, Chops?"

"Yassir."

"I don't think it's going to storm, do you, Chops?" asked Stacy.

"Nassir."

"There you are," declared the fat boy. "You pay your money and you take your choice. It is going to storm, and it isn't going to storm. You'd make a fine thermometer, Chops. Why, you'd have everybody crazy with the heat and the cold all at the same time."

The camp had been pitched in the narrow Smoky Pass of the Blue Ridge through which flowed a tributary of the French Broad River. The stream was very shallow at this time of the year, there having been but few rains, and its course was marked mostly by white sand and smoothly worn rocks, with here and there along the borders of the water course little colonies of the white, pink-petaled trillium gently nodding their heads at the ends of their long, slender stems.

The pass was silent save for the soft murmur of the stream and the songs of birds farther up the rocky sides in the dense foliage. It was an ideal camping place in a dry spell, but not any too desirable in times of high water.

Billy Veal had declared that it offered a perfectly easy route through to the Black Mountain spur for which the party was heading. Billy knew the mountains very well. The boys were obliged to admit that, but the difficulty was to find out what he did know, for he was as likely to say one thing as another. They had decided that the best plan would be to tell him where they wanted to go, leaving him to do the rest. The more questions they asked the less they knew.

"Did you ever see a ghost, Chops?" asked Stacy after they had settled down for an evening's enjoyment.

"Nassir. Yassir," answered the colored man, his eyes growing large.

"I'll show you a ghost some time. Would you like to be introduced to a ghost?" persisted Stacy.

"Yassir. Nassir. Doan' want see no ghosts."

"Then why don't you say so?"

"Yassir."

"Say what you mean," ordered the fat boy sternly. "Don't beat around the bush. You'll be getting yourself into a pickle first thing you know, for--"

"Billy! We are waiting for you to get the supper," warned the Professor severely. "You should have had it well started before this."

"Yassir," answered Chops, grinning broadly.

"You forgot something, Chops," reminded Stacy.

"Yassir?"

"No, nassir," jeered the fat boy.

"Stacy, be good enough to go away from the guide. You are interfering with his duties," rebuked the Professor.

"Nassir. Yassir," mocked the fat boy with a grin almost as broad as Billy Veal's.

They sat down to supper soon after that and all hands agreed that it was an excellent meal. What appealed to their appetites most were the waffles, real old southern waffles, the kind that mother didn't make. A jug of molasses was produced as a surprise. Such a feast the boys had not had within memory. Cool, sparkling water was at hand. One had but to step to the stream and dip it up, but it was the waffles that put pretty much everything else out of mind.

"Why, Billy, I didn't know that you brought syrup," glowed the Professor, now in high good humor.

"Yassir."

"Well, well! This is indeed a surprise, my man."

"I am thankful that he is at last making an effort to earn his wages," muttered Tad Butler. "Thus far he hasn't done much in that direction."

"You must admit that he has guided us pretty well," defended Walter Perkins.

"You mean we have guided ourselves," differed Ned Rector. "Anybody could follow this hollow; in fact, one couldn't get out of it until he got to the end--that is, unless he had wings--unless he was a bird."

"That's Chops," declared Stacy.

"What do you mean?" demanded Ned, turning to the fat boy.

"I mean he is a bird. Must I explain everything to you? If you insist I will draw a picture of a bird and--"

"That will do, Stacy," rebuked Ned.

"Yassir," mimicked Stacy, whereat the boys burst out laughing. There was no resisting Stacy Brown's droll way of saying things. Stacy was a natural comedian, but whether or not he was aware of this, none but himself knew.

There were no waffles left when the boys finished their supper. The clouds had been gathering all the afternoon, and just as they sat back for a comfortable chat on full stomachs, little spatters of rain gave promise of a wet night.

"You see," reminded Tad, nodding to his companions and glancing up to the sky.

"We don't see much, but we feel. I guess you were right at that, Tad," agreed Ned Rector.

"Tad's always right when he isn't wrong," observed Stacy solemnly.

"And you are usually wrong when you are not right," retorted Butler quickly.

"Laying all levity aside, I wish to ask if you young men know where you are," interrupted the Professor.

"Yassir," answered Stacy promptly.

"I suppose we are in the Smoky Pass of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina, sir," replied Tad.

"Exactly. But there are some features about the Blue Ridge which you young gentlemen possibly are not familiar with. For your benefit I will give you a brief talk on this somewhat unfamiliar range of mountains. Ahem! The Blue Ridge is the most easterly range of the Appalachian mountain system. I presume you are unaware that it actually has its beginning at West Point on the Hudson River, whence so many fine young officers went out to fight for their country in the great World War. Am I right in thus supposing?" The Professor glared about him fiercely.

"You win," muttered Stacy.

"It is the fact. The Blue Ridge forms an almost continuous chain from that point down to the north of Alabama. The range makes its way through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and the Carolinas. The Blue Ridge proper is that part of the range below Pennsylvania which separates the Great Valley from the Piedmont region. In south Virginia the range widens into a broad plateau which reaches its widest extent in the state where we now are."

"Yassir," murmured Stacy Brown.

The boys pretended not to have heard the interruption, but the Professor fixed a stern eye on Stacy, and then resumed his lecture.

"In this state, North Carolina," he said, "the range is intersected by numerous groups, such as the Black, the South and the like, some reaching several thousand feet in height. We shall soon be in a spur of the Black Mountains."

"I fear we shall have to find a new guide if we ever get anywhere, Professor," spoke up Tad.

"I am of the opinion that he has done very well. Did he not surprise us with waffles and syrup?" demanded Professor Zepplin.

"He did," agreed the boys.

"On the other hand," added Tad, "our grub is disappearing most mysteriously. I am sure Chunky couldn't eat so much more than the rest of us. Our flour is nearly all gone, though we haven't been out a week. It is almost unbelievable. All the biscuit we brought along have disappeared."

"And those cookies we got in Asheville," mourned Stacy. "I was figuring on having cookies all the way across the mountains. Now I'll have to eat hard-tack and biscuit."

"So long as you don't have to eat salt horse, you ought to consider yourself lucky," retorted Rector.

"As I was about to say when interrupted," continued Professor Zeppelin, "the Black Mountains lie in Buncombe and Yancy counties--"

"Does Chops come from Buncombe?" interrupted Stacy.

"Again I say, they form a spur of the Blue Ridge," resumed the Professor unheeding the interruption, "and are a part of the Appalachian system. They lie between the French Broad River and its main tributary, the Nolichucky."

"Is this the Trolleychucky here at our feet, Professor?" questioned Chunky innocently.

Tad gave the fat boy a prod with the toe of his boot, whereat Stacy turned an indignant face to him.

"Mount Mitchell, Black Dome, Guyot's Peak, Sandoz Knob and Gibbe's Peak, including Smoky Bald and others, form the divide between the Tennessee and Catawba River basins. That, for the present, will be quite sufficient for the topography of the country. As you are no doubt aware, most of the rocks through this region are highly crystalline, but whether of paleozoic or azoic age, is not certain," concluded the Professor.

"Yassir," murmured the fat boy. Chops had been listening with wide open mouth and eyes, not understanding a word of what had been said, but being sure it was something of tremendous importance because he could not understand.

"Here comes the storm," cried Tad as a vivid sheet of lightning flashed up the pass, followed by a deafening peal of thunder.

Almost instantly the rain began to fall, and the boys scrambled for their tents, while Chops, wrapping himself in a blanket, crouched in front of the fire. From their tents the lads could talk to each other, the openings of the tents being close to the fire itself. They continued their conversation from the tents. By this time the rain was roaring on the canvas in a perfect torrent.

"It's going to be a good night to sleep," called Ned.

"I am not so sure of that," answered Tad Butler.

"I reckon it'll be a fine night for ducks," observed Chunky.

"Young man, that is not seemly language," rebuked the Professor.

"It's the truth. Isn't truth seemly?" demanded Stacy.

"You are evading the question."

"I beg your pardon, I'm not. I am bumping right up against it," retorted the fat boy, amid smothered laughter.

The roar of the storm soon made the boys sleepy, and a few minutes later the last of the party, except Tad, had turned in. Butler watched the storm for an hour, listening thoughtfully to the river and the rain.

"It is my opinion that we'll be having trouble before morning," he muttered as he threw himself down on his bed of boughs. He did not remove his clothes, as had the others, in which perhaps Tad Butler was wise.

Once more the Pony Rider Boys were well started on their summer's ride, led by Professor Zeppelin, the tutor who had accompanied them on so many happy adventures in the saddle on their summer outings. The Professor, who, in spite of his sternness, was as much a boy as his charges, took a secret delight in their pranks and their noisy chatter.

Following their lively adventures in other fields, they had elected to explore the apparently more peaceful territory of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In fact, the Pony Rider Boys did not look forward to adventures here, but in this they were destined to be considerably surprised.

The Pony Rider party had made camp in a narrow spot in what was known as Smoky Pass, and were now facing a storm which Tad Butler believed promised to be a severe one. Nor in this belief was Tad one whit outside of the truth, for, as he listened, the storm steadily increased in fury. The present center of the rising storm appeared to be to the eastward of their camp, and already the ordinarily small stream at their feet was muttering ominously. Its waters, sparkling clear an hour before, were now muddy and swollen. Tad's observant "weather eye" also noted that the stream was full of drift and torn-off foliage.

Billy Veal, the guide, he observed, stood wide-eyed and shivering just beyond the fire, for Billy was wet, and he was afraid.

"Come in here," ordered Tad, and Billy obeyed with evident reluctance.

"Do you know of any place hereabouts where we might climb up the side of the pass?" Tad demanded.

"Yassir, nassir," chattered Veal.

"Well, which is it?" insisted Butler sharply.

"Nassir."

"Humph! Then, if we wanted to get out of this pass, and could neither go up nor downstream, what would you do, Billy?"

"Ah reckons Ah'd stay heah, sah."

"Pshaw!" grunted Tad disgustedly. Trying to wring information from Billy was far from satisfying. "Sit down in here where you can keep dry, and if the storm gets much worse let me know. I am going to turn in and get some sleep." Tad, who had risen to have a look at the weather, threw himself down again, for he was tired and sleepy.

The campground was very low, and, were the creek to rise much above its present channel, Butler knew that his party would come in for a fine wetting. However, this was not greatly disturbing to him, though he did not exactly like the idea of being shut up in that walled-in pass with no way of getting out save by following the stream either up or down. Tad quickly went to sleep and slumbered on unmindful of the roar of the storm. He was disturbed some three hours later by howls from the tent occupied by Stacy Brown.

"Oh, wow!" yelled the fat boy.

Tad Butler, like every other member of the party, was awakened by Stacy's yell. Chops sat shivering and regarding him apprehensively. He had never before heard Chunky howl, and the howl was terrifying to him.

"Go and see what is the matter with Mr. Brown," directed Tad.

Stacy's howls broke forth afresh.

"Hey! Stop that. What's the matter?" shouted Tad.

"I'm all afloat. I'm soused from head to foot," came the reply.

"Save you the trouble of taking a bath," answered Butler.

"I'll drown," wailed Stacy.

"Oh, stop it and get a boat," urged Ned Rector's voice.

"Why didn't you pile in hemlock boughs, as I told you to do, then you wouldn't have got wet," rebuked Tad. "Are you lying in the water?"

"Yes. What'll I do?"

"You'll get wetter, so far as I am able to see."

About this time Professor Zeppelin in his pajamas was charging out of his tent. He was drenched in a second.

"Guide, isn't there a higher and drier place that we can get to?" demanded the Professor.

"Yassir. Nassir."

"We are in a pocket, Professor. We'll have to take our medicine," called Tad.

"I don't like my medicine so cold," wailed the fat boy.

"All hands had better dress," advised Butler. "I think we are about to experience some trouble."

"What do you think?" questioned the Professor.

"I think we are in for a ducking."

Tad put on a rubber coat, and pulling his hat well down, stepped out. By this time there was no fire. It had been drowned out, and the night was black. He could not see a thing, but the ominous roar of the creek was close at hand.

The boy went back to his tent and got a lantern. Emerging with this, a grim smile settled on the Pony Rider Boy's face as he surveyed the scene. The waters from the stream were swirling and eddying about the bases of the tents; the stream had left its former channel and pretty much all the former dry ground was covered with a thin coating of water. Professor Zeppelin glanced about apprehensively.

"This looks serious," he observed.

"It does," agreed Tad.

"But what are we going to do?"

"I think we had better break camp and try to make our way out of this while we may," replied Tad. "The horses already are standing in water above their fetlocks. They'll be in it up to their bodies soon, at the present rate of rise."

"What does the guide say?" demanded Professor Zeppelin.

"The guide isn't saying anything. Chops is too frightened to talk. Shall I give the orders, sir?" asked Butler.

"Yes, if you think best, Tad. Your judgment in these matters I have usually found to be sound."

"Turn out, fellows! Turn out in a hurry, too, unless you prefer to take a long swim. Saddle the ponies, Chops. Move!" urged Tad sharply.

The Pony Rider camp was instantly turned into a scene of activity. The boys knew from Tad's tone that the situation was alarming, and they lost no time in getting into their wet clothes, Chunky chattering like a magpie, Chops rolling his eyes as if he were about to go into a fit, and the faces of the other boys showing more than ordinary concern.

The situation was critical, even more so than Tad Butler thought, but which he, with the others, was soon to realize.

CHAPTER II

BATTLING WITH A GREAT FLOOD

Fortunately for the Pony Rider outfit, Tad Butler's forethought had saved much of their provisions, for the "chuck" had been suspended from the crotch of a sapling where it now swung high and dry above the water that was swirling below it.

Not trusting the guide to pack the provisions Tad took that task upon himself, while his companions, with the exception of Stacy Brown, were getting the other equipment together for a hurried move. Billy Veal, in the present emergency, was about as useful as a wooden man. Too frightened to keep his mind on his work, whatever he did he did badly.

"Who was the man who recommended Chops to you, Professor?" called Tad.

"The banker at Asheville, sir. Why?"

"Oh, nothing much except that I'd like to be a judge and have that banker come up before me just once--just once, mind you."

"I am inclined to agree with you, young man," replied the Professor. "Were there a reasonable chance for him to get home alive I should be for sending Veal there at once."

"What are we going to do now?" cried Ned running up to them, now fully clothed, with oilskins covering his body down to the knees.

"We are going to try to get out of here. Hurry with the tents. Strike the camp in a rush, boys!" commanded Tad.

"If we wait long enough the lightning will do that for us," jeered Stacy.

"No levity, gentlemen," was the Professor's stern command. "This is a time for action, not so-called humor."

"Yassir," piped the fat boy.

The tents came down quickly, but they were not packed with the usual care. Instead they were folded up hastily and stowed in the packs of the various boys. The lads worked like tentmen striking circus tents when looking forward to a long run to the next town. The result was that the equipment was ready for moving in almost record time. The water was plainly rising as Tad could see by the light of the flickering lanterns.

"Now, Professor, we are all ready," announced Butler finally. "What would you suggest?"

"I am depending upon you, Tad. I thought you had some plan in mind. However, so long as you have asked me, I would suggest that we continue on upstream."

"I think it would be wiser to go the other way," advised Tad. "Guide, is there any place below here where we can make a dry landing?"

"Yassir."

"That's good. How far below?"

"Right smart piece, sah."

"How far?" demanded Tad insistently.

"Right smart, sah."

"You can't get anything out of him," grumbled Butler disgustedly.

"How far is 'right smart,' Chops?" interjected Rector.

"A right smart, sah."

"A mile?"

"Yassir."

"Two miles?"

"Yassir."

"You see, Professor," spoke up Tad with a shrug of the shoulders. "We can expect no help from Chops. We've got to trust to our own judgment."

The Professor nodded reflectively.

"Why do you prefer to go down rather than upstream?" he asked.

"For the reason that we shall meet higher water up there, and besides this we shall be beating against the flood instead of going with it. You will find the going easier downstream than the other way."

"I am inclined to think you are right. But the difficulty is that we don't know what we are going to meet that way now."

"We shall have to take our chances, that's all. And the sooner we get started the better. We'll be swept off from this camp ground pretty soon. You see how rapidly the water is rising?" reminded Butler.

"Then we will go downstream. Get ready, boys."

"We're ready," cried Ned.

"I'm not ready," answered Stacy. "I--I've got to tie my shoe. I--"

"Let him tie his shoe. He can follow along when he gets ready. We don't propose to stay here and drown," declared Ned.

"I'll lead the way with a lantern," announced Tad. "Chops, you ride up next to me. Ned, you follow along at the rear with a second lantern. In that way we shall be pretty well able to see what we are doing and what is going on along the line."

"An excellent idea," approved Professor Zepplin. "You have a wise head on your shoulders, Tad."

"But a wet one," laughed the Pony Rider Boy, mounting his pony and wading it cautiously into the rapidly moving water. "Come on there, Chops. Why are you hanging back?"

"Yassir," answered Billy Veal riding in after Tad with evident reluctance.

The water was up to the bellies of the ponies. The little animals put back their ears. They did not like the task before them. Chunky had trouble with his mount and for a moment it looked as though the fat boy would be dumped into the flood. After a brief battle, however, he managed to get his horse headed in the right direction.

For the first half hour the boys made their way along without great difficulty, though they could tell that the water was rising all the time. At first they had held their feet up, to keep them out of the water. But now they were riding with feet in stirrups, well down in the water. Their feet were already benumbed with the cold, the ponies were snorting, and the night seemed to be growing blacker with the moments.

All at once Ned's voice was raised above the roar of the water in a warning shout.

"Pull to the right!" he called.

The word was passed along quickly, whereat every one forced his pony against the steep wall on the right-hand side. They were none too soon. A great tumbling shape went tearing by, raking the legs and sides of the horses. Billy Veal, not having got out of the way quickly enough, was caught, and his pony was swept from its feet. The colored man fell, uttering a yell of fear.

Tad, with quick presence of mind, threw his own body forward and taking a stiff brace on the right stirrup reached down grasping Billy by the coat collar. Chops was yelling lustily.

"Stop it! Howling won't help you!" bellowed Tad.

A big tree, having been uprooted by the storm, had done the work. But the tree had come and gone almost before the Pony Rider Boys realized what had occurred. Billy was floundering in the water. Tad was holding to him with difficulty.

"If you don't stop it, I'll let go," threatened Tad. "You'll drown if I do. Buck up!"

"Let him go! We don't want him," shouted Chunky mockingly.

"Ride up beside me and help me, or I shall let go," gritted Tad, holding to the fellow with all his strength.

Chunky obeyed reluctantly. He was afraid to get mixed up with this fresh difficulty, fearing that he might be unhorsed. Chunky had sense enough to know what that would mean to him, but he lent his aid as best he could, and between them they managed to get Chops up on Tad's horse.

In the meantime Walter had ridden ahead and caught the guide's pony after a struggle with the wiry little animal that nearly terminated in Walter's getting a bath in the cold water, though they all were about as wet as it was possible to be. It was not the wetness that they feared, however, but the swift current that nearly took the ponies off their feet, sure-footed as the tough little animals were. Some further trouble was experienced in getting Chops back on his own horse, and it was only by lifting him over bodily while two of them forced the guide's pony over against Tad's mount that they succeeded at all.

"If you get into difficulties again I guess you'll have to shift for yourself," declared Butler. "We have about all we can do to look out for ourselves without attending to you, Chops."

"Ya--yassir."

"Oh, shoot the 'yassir,'" jeered Rector. "Are we all right side up with care once more?"

"Fit as dry fiddles," cried Tad. "Forward, all! Are you ready, Professor?"

"As ready as I shall be tonight. All hands keep watching the bank on either side for a landing place."

"I am looking after that. You may all help, of course," replied Tad.

They started on again. In places the current was so swift, where it swirled into a bend of the stream, that Tad was obliged to follow the current, rather than take the more direct course. He felt that his pony could not stand the added strain were he to go straight ahead.

It was a weird scene, the shadowy figures outlined in the dim light of the lanterns, the film of spray kicked up by man and horse, the great dark walls towering on either side, and the roar of the flood making necessary loud talking if one hoped to have his voice reach his companions. Chops was the only one who really acted as if he were afraid. Tad Butler rode ahead with all the steadiness of a seasoned trooper going into battle. The others were not far behind him in composure, though Stacy Brown's eyes were large and staring.

Once more their thoughts were interrupted by a call from Ned, who, as the reader knows, was bringing up the rear of the procession. Ned's voice again had in it a note of warning.

"Ask him what it is," called Tad.

"He says he doesn't know," answered the Professor.

Tad halted his pony and turned in the saddle waiting until Ned came up with him.

"What is it, Ned?" he demanded.

"Don't you hear that noise?"

"That roaring?" asked Butler.

"Yes."

"I've been listening to that for the last sixty seconds," answered Tad, his face drawing down into sharp lines of concentration. "What do you think it is?"

"Water."

"It's something more than mere water. It's a torrent, Ned. This is where we get it. Everyone crowd close to the bank," shouted Tad.

"What for? Is--is it another tree?" demanded Chunky.

"It's water and a lot of it. The crest of the flood I think is coming down. Perhaps it won't last long and perhaps it may endure for half an hour or so. Hug the wall over here on the left side. It's less exposed there. Chops! Get over here! Be lively!"

They had not long to wait. Already pieces of bark, limbs, torn branches, roots and sod were tearing their way down the pass, slapping the legs of the ponies, causing the little animals to rear and plunge and snort, and to make frantic efforts to get out of the way. This made it the more difficult for the boys to manage them, to keep them close to the bank where they would be safer than farther out in the stream.

"There goes my lantern!" yelled Ned. "I'm in the dark."

"You're lucky if you don't find yourself in a darker place in a few minutes," muttered Tad Butler apprehensively. Just then a piece of wood hurled against his own lantern shattered the globe, at the same time tearing the lantern from his hand, leaving only the wire handle in his possession.

Impenetrable darkness instantly settled over the roaring scene, and above the roar was heard the voice of Stacy Brown.

"Yassir. Nassir!" mocked Chunky.

"Stick tight to the left. Quit your fooling!" shouted Tad.

CHAPTER III

LOST IN A MOUNTAIN TORRENT

"Hang together if you can. Crowd close in behind me!"

Had all obeyed the orders of young Butler they might have escaped with no serious consequences, but in the excitement of the moment and swallowed up in the darkness of the night in Smoky Pass, the boys were quickly separated. One had pulled this way in fighting with his pony, another that. Even Professor Zeppelin had been carried into a cove far on the other side, for at this point the stream had broadened out considerably.

All at once Tad felt his pony lifted from its feet. The animal began to swim. To lighten the burden the boy slipped off, taking a hitch of his rope about his waist, securing the rope to the pommel of the saddle. It was now a case of every man for himself and trust to luck.

"Are you there?" he called to his companions.

"Ya--yassir," answered Billy Véal.

"Are you there?" again demanded Tad at the top of his voice.

He heard a shout in reply, the shout seeming to come from far down the stream. Then Tad was caught in a wave and swept along with the current, clinging desperately to the saddle. There was no need to try to swim. He was traveling fast enough without attempting to go any faster. Every little while the boy would shout for his companions. Only twice was he able to catch a reply from any of the party.

"I am afraid they're lost," groaned the boy. Even the familiar "yassir" of Chops was no longer to be heard. Billy Véal had disappeared, and for all Tad knew the guide had been drowned. Now and then a tree or a heavy trunk would graze the body of the lad. Lightning was still flashing at intervals, but the storm was passing, and already a faint streak of light might have been observed roofing the narrow opening over Smoky Pass.

All at once Tad found himself enveloped in a new darkness. Something seemed to have caught his head in a vise-like grip, and he lost consciousness. Though Butler did not know it, a heavy piece of timber had been hurled against him, striking the lad on the head. The rope that had been secured about the boy's waist slipped up under his arms under the added weight put upon it. Tad's head drooped, but not far enough to permit the water to cover it. Then on swept boy and pony through the swirling flood, the pony fighting, the boy passive. Another pony bumped into Butler's horse, but Tad did not know of the collision.

How long he had been unconscious, Tad did not know, but it could not have been for very long, and when he returned to consciousness he found himself literally hanging at the side of the pony. The animal was standing dripping and trembling, but, as the Pony Rider Boy quickly discovered, the horse was on solid ground. The roar of the swollen stream was still in Butler's ears, but he was no longer battling with the flood. The night was still so dark that he could not see the water, though overhead he saw the stars twinkling brightly.

Tad spoke to his horse. The animal whinnied its appreciation, and Tad patted it with a feeble hand. The boy was still too weak to do more than lie back, breathing hard, and exerting every bit of will power that he possessed to pull himself together.

"This won't do. I'll surely shake to pieces if I remain here," he muttered.

With a great effort he pulled himself up and released himself from the rope.

"Hello!" called Tad with all his strength.

There was no response.

"They've gone! I hope they aren't drowned, but I am sure something terrible has happened to them. How I wish it were light so that I could see what I am about."

Taking the bridle rein in one hand, Tad began feeling about in the darkness. He learned that the pony had dragged him up to a narrow, sandy strip of land at the base of the wall. The ground was wet, indicating that the water had but recently receded from it. This proved to the boy that the crest of the flood had passed and that the water was rapidly going down.

"There's little doubt that it was the crest that struck us. But the question is, what hit me? I don't suppose it would help if that question were answered. The real question is, what has become of my companions?" he muttered.

There was nothing to be done just yet, though Tad decided to try the creek very soon. This he did after half an hour's waiting. By that time his pony had recovered itself sufficiently to warrant Butler in climbing to the wet, slippery saddle. How cold it did feel underneath him, but the heat of his body soon took away this unpleasant sensation.

Tad boldly forced the pony into the creek. To the boy's relief the water barely touched the stirrups.

"Now if I don't fall into any pockets in the creek, I'm all right. I don't know whether the others are below or above me, but I'm going down a piece and if I find no one, I'll turn about and come back."

Every few moments Tad would shout. At last there came an answering call.

"Who are you?" cried the lad joyously.

"Chunky!"

"Chunky?"

"Yassir, nassir," answered the fat boy.

"Where are you?"

"I'm where the little boy was when he was chased by a bulldog--up a tree."

Riding over toward the voice, Butler found this to be literally true. Stacy had grabbed at a limb that had struck him in the face, and then swung himself up to the limb, permitting his pony to go on where it would.

"Take me down," begged Stacy.

"Where are the others?"

"I saw Jonah go by me just after I landed from my ark."

"Who?" wondered Butler.

"Chops."

"But the rest of them?" urged Tad.

"I don't know anything about them. I've had all I could do to look after myself, and don't you forget it. Where have you been?"

"Up the creek a way. What became of your pony?"

"I don't know. I tell you I've been busy. It wasn't any fun to hang to this limb, not knowing at what second it was going to break and let me down into the water. I reckon that would have been the end of Stacy Brown. Then the papers at home would have had something to talk about. 'Our distinguished fellow townsman, Stacy Brown, carried away and lost in a flood in Smoky Pass in the Blue Ridge.' Sounds kind of romantic, doesn't it?"

"You have about as much feeling as a turnip," remarked Tad disgustedly. "The others may be drowned. I wish you had your pony. I don't know what I am to do, but I'm afraid I'll have to leave you up there while I go and search for the

others."

"What? Leave me up here in this tree?" wailed Chunky, changing his tone instantly.

"Yes."

"No you don't! My death will be on your head if you do. Don't you ever accuse me of not having any feeling, if you go away and leave me treed like a coon at bay."

"I suppose I'll have to take you, but the pony's pretty well played out and so am I. Here, give me your hand."

In trying to make the pass from the limb to the pony, Stacy fell into the water with a splash and uttering a yell. He thought he was going to be drowned, but was surprised when he found that the water did not reach far above his waist. The pony, frightened by the splash, leaped to one side, nearly unseating its rider.

"You're a lumbering lummoX," rebuked Tad.

"So are you. If you hadn't been, you wouldn't have let me fall. Are you going to help me get up?"

"Yes. I will get down and walk. You may ride if you want to. I'm not going to ask the pony to carry us both."

Chunky reflected over this for a moment. Tad slipped down into the cold water.

"Get up there, and mind you don't let my pony get away," ordered Butler.

"I won't!"

"You won't what?"

"I won't get up."

"I got down so that you might."

"I'm not that kind of a tenderfoot and you ought to know it by this time. No, sir; I don't do anything of the sort. Get back there and ride your own bundle of bones."

"I prefer to walk," answered Butler briefly.

"So do I, and I'm going to."

Neither would get into the saddle, so they very stubbornly started splashing along beside the pony, each with a hand on the bridle to save himself in case he stepped into a hole in the stream.

Tad continued calling until his voice gave out, but got no reply from anyone.

"Come now, you yell for a while," he urged.

"What shall I say?" asked Chunky innocently.

"Say? I don't care what you say. Make a noise. That's all. I want to find the rest of our party."

"I'll bet Chops is alive. But isn't he the Jonah?"

"I hadn't thought about it," answered Tad briefly.

"You will when you get calmed down a little. You're excited now," declared Stacy Brown.

"I'm nothing of the sort," protested Tad indignantly.

"Oh, yes you are. You don't know it, that's all," insisted the fat boy.

A sharp retort rose to Tad's lips, but he suppressed it. There was no use in arguing with Chunky, who was bound to have the last word and that last word always did have a sting in it. At present there were more important matters on hand. Soon after that Tad's hello was answered by one a short distance down the pass. Contrary to his usual powers of

voice, Chunky had not proved much of a success in yelling.

The new voice turned out to belong to Ned Rector. Ned and his pony had found a strip of land on which they had taken refuge. It was a glad Ned, too, when he discovered his companions.

"Have you seen anything of Walter and the Professor?" asked Butler anxiously.

"I think they are below here somewhere. I am sure it was they who swept past me just after we got caught in the eddy back there."

"How about Jonah?" asked Stacy.

"Who is Jonah?"

"The Jonah who claims to be a guide, but who ought to be in a strait-jacket."

"He means Chops," laughed Tad.

"I don't know that I care particularly what has become of him," growled Ned.

"Oh, yes you do, Ned. He is a human being just the same as you or I," rebuked Stacy.

"I suppose that's so, but the question is open to argument and a wide difference of opinion. I think the Veal Chop stayed upstream somewhere, though he may have gone on downstream. If he did, I didn't see him go, nor hear him. Come to think of it, it seems to me that I did hear him yelling behind me after I started on my swim for life. Talk of going through the Rapids of Niagara! I don't believe your swim in the Grand Canyon was any more exciting than this one tonight. It was daylight then," said Ned.

"Yes," agreed Tad.

"Oh, wait till I get hold of that guide! What I won't do to him--"

"It will be my turn first, Ned," interrupted Stacy.

"What happened to you, by the way?" questioned Ned.

"Oh, I got left up a tree, just like the alligator bait down in Florida. Do you know how the colored people catch alligators down there?"

"In a woodchuck trap?" questioned Rector quizzically.

"Na-a-a-a! I'll tell you for your information, if you don't know. They take a little colored baby and tie him either to the limb of a tree that hangs over the water, or else fasten him to a long pole--one that will bend--then lower him over the water. He yells--could you blame him? The 'gators, hearing the yell, and maybe getting a whiff of the kid, come up with open jaws with appetites that would break a hotel. No, they don't get the little cullud person. They get a chunk of lead right through one eye and usually that's the end of Mr. 'Gator. The tiny cullud person is removed from the pole and the deed's done and everybody's happy ever afterwards."

"A very likely story!" observed Ned scornfully.

"Very," agreed Tad. "We had better be getting downstream to look for the others."

Ned refused to get off and walk, so he rode ahead of them to sound the bottom of the stream. Day was just breaking when they came across the Professor and Walter Perkins, both sprinting up and down on a sandy beach to start their blood into circulation. So ludicrous did the two look that the boys shouted. They could well afford to shout now that all of their party were accounted for, with the exception of the guide, whom they had little doubt they should find later safe and sound.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENED TO CHOPS

"Boys, boys!" cried the Professor. "You don't know how relieved I am to see you safe and sound--"

"And wet and miserable," added Stacy.

"That doesn't make any difference so long as you are safe. I feared something serious might have happened to you."

"There did. Tad was knocked out and I was lost up a tree," added the fat boy eagerly. "Oh, what a fine time we're having!"

"Where is the guide?"

"We are going back to look for him, Professor," answered Butler. "I don't know what has become of him."

"And we don't care what's become of the Jonah," scoffed Chunky. "Got anything that looks like food in this outfit?"

"Yes. By the way, Professor, how about the stores? Have you saved any from your packs?" questioned Tad.

"I am afraid the provisions are in a sad state," answered Professor Zeppelin ruefully.

"But surely the canned stuff must be all right," urged Tad.

"Yes, but where is the canned stuff? The pack holding the canned goods came open and everything spilled out," Walter Perkins informed them.

Chunky groaned.

"I see my end! Not satisfied with trying to drown me in a raging flood, you now propose to starve me to death! But I won't be starved. I'll go out and shoot a deer. I understand they are plentiful in this range of rocks."

"I reckon you will have to get out of Smoky Pass before you carry out any of your well-laid plans," answered Ned.

At Tad's suggestion, such stores and equipment as they had saved were taken from the packs and spread out on the ground to dry. Most of the biscuit were so soaked that they were falling apart. Not a single can of food was left, although a ham had been preserved from the wreck. Their extra clothing, too, had been saved from the flood, and merely needed drying to be fit for use.

"We can live on ham for a long, long time," said Tad encouragingly. "Then there is the coffee which will be usable after we have dried it out. I propose that we leave all the stuff here with someone to watch it, while the rest of us go upstream to see what we can pick up, and at the same time look for Chops. I am mighty glad that we haven't lost our tents. Professor, will you stay here while we take the trail?"

"Yes. But you will be careful, won't you?"

"Of what?"

"That you don't get into other difficulties."

"No danger of that," answered Tad laughingly. "Everything that could occur already has happened, unless Stacy were to climb the side of the pass and fall off."

"No, thank you," objected the fat boy. "You may stir up all the excitement you like, but no more for Stacy Brown until he is at least dried out from the last mixup."

Tad now suggested that he and Ned go back to look for their lost property and their guide.

"The rest of the party will remain here," he directed. "No need for you to go with us, but suppose we have something to eat first--ham and coffee, for instance."

"We have no matches to start a fire with," reminded Walter Perkins.

The boys looked very solemn. Chunky groaned dismally.

"I knew you fellows would find some way to my distress--to the awful gnawing on the inside of me," he complained.

"Never mind, young men," spoke up the Professor. "Find some reasonably dry wood or bark, and I will attend to the lighting end. Fortunately my match safe is intended for just such an emergency as this, and I do not believe we shall find any difficulty in making a fire, provided you rustle the fuel."

The Pony Rider Boys gave a cheer for Professor Zeppelin. The problem of finding wood, however, was almost as perplexing as had been that of the matches. Tad immediately jumped on his pony and trotted up the pass. He returned half an hour later, with a bundle of bark, dry sticks and a few pieces of pitchpine. A roaring fire was going soon after his arrival. The warmth from it felt good, indeed, to the wet and shivering Pony Riders.

Breakfast that morning was limited, so far as variety was concerned, though there was plenty to eat, and the ham had grown perceptibly smaller when they finished, and not the least of this had found a resting place in the person of Stacy Brown. Stacy was quite willing to remain with Walter and the Professor.

Tad and Ned started up the pass immediately after breakfast, and on the way up they recovered the missing ponies, except the pack animal, which must have been carried away with most of their stores. Later in the day they discovered Billy Veal fast asleep in the sunlight on a ledge of rock, some eight feet above the channel of the creek. How he had succeeded in getting up there neither Tad nor Ned could imagine, nor did Billy seem to know what had happened to him. He sat up, regarding them with wide eyes, after they had called to him several times. Great was their relief when they found him, but the next problem was how to get Billy down. This was solved by Tad's ever-ready rope. One end of this was tossed up to the guide with instructions to pass it about a nearby sapling, tossing the free end down to them. In this way Tad would only have to pull on one rope after the colored man had come down, then the rope would slip back to its owner. Shortly after that Billy was standing in the creek channel beside them.

"Did you get wet, Chops?" asked Rector.

"Yassir, nassir."

"Did you get drowned?" asked Tad with a grin.

"Nassir, yassir, I done--"

"He doesn't know what happened to him," scoffed Ned.

"You come along with us. There's work to be done today and if you don't do your share, I shall have something besides words for you," threatened Butler.

They made the guide walk until they came up with his pony. Chops grinned broadly, delightedly, when he discovered his horse browsing contentedly beside the stream.

"Wah-hoo-wah!" he shouted, flinging his arms above his head.

"Who would have thought him to be so near human?" cried Ned.

"Yes, there's hope for Chops yet. But we shall see," answered Butler.

It was considerably past noon when they reached their companions on the return journey. A few of their belongings had been picked up in the pass, but not enough to relieve their critical situation.

"Boys, I have been thinking, since you left. We shall have to find a place where we may replenish our stores, else we shall have to go back. Guide, do you know of a store anywhere near here?" asked the Professor.

"Yassir."

"You forgot something," laughed Tad.

"Nassir," jeered Stacy. "Chops, you're a Jonah. I've said it before, and I say it again. Why, you couldn't go to the aquarium without some of the whales biting you."

"That will do, Stacy. Now, guide, where is this store that you know about?" urged the Professor.

"Jim Abs', sah. Ah reckon him done keep a store at Hunt's Corners, sah."

"Good for you, Chops," cheered the boys.

"How far is that from here?"

"Right smart piece, ah reckon, sah."

"How far, how far?" insisted Professor Zeppelin. The Professor was near to losing his temper.

"Right smart, sah, right smart."

"It's hopeless," declared Butler. "The best we can do will be to follow him. See here, Chops, shall we be able to reach there before dark if we start out right away?"

"Yassir, nassir."

"He means no," interpreted Tad.

"I wish you'd give me the key so I could understand what he does mean," said Ned disgustedly.

"You'd have to get the key to the whale, if you expect to understand Jonah," scoffed the fat boy.

"I would suggest that we start at once," said Tad. "The outfit is pretty well dried out now. It doesn't matter so much about the tents. They will dry quickly after they have been pitched. When we come to a good camping place we will go into camp along towards night. In the morning we can go on and find the store. Are you sure you know where it is, Billy?"

"Guyot's Peak."

"Very good, very good. You are improving, my man."

"Yassir. T'ank you, sah."

"Nassir, ah don't t'ank you, sah," mocked Stacy.

"Let him alone, can't you?" demanded Ned savagely.

"Yes, while he is trying to be good, help instead of discouraging him. You are enough to upset anyone," returned Tad, trying to be stern.

The camp was pitched near a spring and there in the warm late afternoon sun a thorough drying out was given to both tents and equipment, with everyone in excellent humor. The boys even sang as they went about their work of dressing up the camp.

Supper consisted of more ham and some excellent coffee, the latter having been thoroughly dried out before grinding. Chops, of course, ate his supper after the others had finished, one or another of the boys now and then tossing him a piece of food while they were eating, which Billy ordinarily swallowed whole.

The evening was spent sitting about the campfire telling stories and joking with one another. At such times the Professor came in for a share of jibes, all of which he took with smiling face, frequently giving the boys back better than they had sent.

Morning was ushered in with a brilliant sun, the birds singing all about them and the fresh odors of foliage and flowers in the air. Even Chunky began to sing before he had finished his dressing.

"Anybody'd think you were a bird," called Rector.

"Thank you for the compliment," retorted Stacy.

"I didn't say what kind of a bird, did I?" jeered Ned.

"What kind am I?"

"You remind me of a crow. You sing like a crow. I'll wager that Chops can sing better than you."

"How about it, Chops?" called Tad.

"Yassir?"

"Can you sing?"

"Yassir."

"Nassir," added Chunky.

"Let's hear you," urged Walter.

"Yes, I guess we can stand it after all we have been through," decided the fat boy.

"Wha' you want me sing?" grinned Chops.

"Sing something soft and low," begged Stacy.

"No, none of those sob songs for mine," objected Ned. "Give us something to cheer us up. We need cheering."

"Yassir."

Chops cleared his throat and with frying pan in hand began to sing in a melodious voice:

Quit dat playin' 'possum,
Ah sees dem eyelids peep!
Spec's to fool yo' mammy
P'tendin' you'se ersleep.

Smah'tes li'l baby dat uver drord a bref,
Try ter fool he mammy, he gwine git sho'-nuff lef.
'Possum, 'possum, 'possum mighty sly,
'Possum, 'possum, 'possum, ah sees you blink dat eye.

Bye-o, bye-o, baby,
'Possum mighty sly,
Bye-o, bye-o, baby, Bye-o, bye-o-bye.
M-hm-m-m-m. M-hm-hm-hm!

"Hooray!" howled the Pony Rider Boys.

""Possum mighty sly, Bye-o, bye-o, baby bye.""

"Go on. Sing some more," urged Tad.

"Yes, for goodness' sake do something that you really know how to do," cried Ned Rector.

Chops began swaying his body, swinging the frying pan from side to side. Then he launched into another song that set the boys joining in the chorus, swinging their own bodies, keeping time with the singer.

CHAPTER V

EXCITEMENT AT HUNT'S CORNERS

"Is this another of those cry-baby songs?" questioned Ned.

"Yassir."

"Go on, go on," urged the boys.

W'en de sun roll in an' de moon roll out,
An' de li'l stars git sprink'l't all erbout,
Den ah listens fer my honey an' ah calls her an' ah shout,
O Lindy, Lindy, Lindy, O my Lindy!
O Lindy, come erlong
An' listen at my song;
De mockin' bu 'd is singin' ter his honey,
Come, lemme sing ter you
An' tell you, tell you true,
Dat ah loves you mo' dan heaps er silver money,

Twice did the Pony Rider Boys roar out the chorus until they had drowned the voice of the singer entirely. In their merriment they forgot all about the breakfast, all about the thick slices of ham that had long since dropped from the frying pan of the singing Billy Veal.

"Come, come, young men," interrupted the voice of Professor Zeppelin. "Singing is all right, but I want my breakfast."

Stacy thrust his chin up close to the Professor's face and in a low, crooning voice, sang,

Come, lemme sing ter you,
An' tell you, tell you true,
Dat ah loves you mo' dan heaps er silver money.

The boys chuckled at the ludicrous sight of Stacy Brown in his pajamas singing a lullaby to the dignified Professor. It was too much for the Professor's gravity, too. The latter let out his own voice in a roar of laughter that, according to Ned Rector in describing the scene later, fairly shook old Smoky, miles off to the northward of them.

"Now, gentlemen," said Professor Zeppelin, after having recovered his composure, "if you will be good enough to rescue the ham from beneath the feet of our guide, we will proceed with our preparations for the morning meal. You have a very fine voice, guide."

"Yassir."

"We shall be glad to have you sing for us again."

"Some day when you have such cold that you can't speak above a whisper," added Stacy Brown, trotting back to his tent to put on his clothes.

Shortly after eight o'clock the camp was struck, tents packed and everything put in shape for the journey to Hunt's Corners, the location of which Chops confidently assured them was a right smart distance straight ahead. This proved to be true. It was four hours later when the outfit drew up at a log building, one-storied, the low porch being piled with small agricultural implements. In the rear were three other buildings constructed of the same material, but not nearly so large as the store itself.

Several mountaineers were lounging about, and the arrival of the Pony Rider Boys created considerable excitement. Jim Abs, proprietor of the store, came out to see what the commotion was about. He recognized Billy at once, but glanced suspiciously from one to the other of the boys, whose warlike appearance evidently stirred apprehension in the mind of the keeper of the store at Hunt's Corners.

The boys slid from their saddles and tethered their horses at the tie rail to one side of the store building. Professor Zeppelin stepped up, followed by the crowd of loungers, and introduced himself to the proprietor, stating that they were desirous of laying in a stock of supplies.

"I reckon I kin accommodate ye," nodded Abs. "Where ye hail from?"

"The north," the Professor informed him.

"Say, Mister, where's the Corners?" piped Stacy.

"This is them," grinned the storekeeper.

"I don't see any corners except the corners of the building."

"You wouldn't know a corner if you were to meet it in Smoky Pass," declared Tad.

"I know a good thing when I see it, and those bananas hanging there look pretty real to me," answered Stacy, helping himself to half a dozen of the well-seasoned bunch.

"That'll be thirty cents," said the storekeeper, extending a hand. Stacy regarded him solemnly. The fat boy's mouth was so full of banana that he was speechless for the moment.

Chunky nodded his head at Tad, indicating that Butler was to pay for the fruit. Stacy was too busy to waste time in paying. Tad good-naturedly handed out thirty cents.

"That's sixty-five cents you owe me now, Chunky. If you keep on at this rate I'll have to levy on your pony."

"I wouldn't give sixty-five cents for his whole outfit," declared Ned.

"Perhaps that is because you haven't sixty-five cents," retorted Tad.

"Yes, I have. I've got several times sixty-five cents."

"It's counterfeit, then," mumbled Stacy.

"Boys," called the Professor coming to the door of the store, "did you know this is a post office?"

"A post office?" cried the lads.

"Yes. I thought perhaps you might wish to send off some letters."

"Yes, we do. Indeed, we do," cried Ned and Tad and Walter in chorus.

"But we shall have to write them. We haven't any letters ready. Can we get paper here? Ours is all down in the pass," said Tad.

"I suppose you can get all you want in here, provided you have the money to pay for it," smiled Professor Zepplin.

"Oh, we have the price, though I suppose I shall have to pay for Chunky. He is broke as usual," laughed Butler.

"He'll be broke worse before he finishes this nice peaceful trip. Don't you say so, Chops?" jeered Ned.

"Yassir," grinned the guide.

"Do you want to write letters, too, Billy?" teased Stacy.

"Yassir, nassir."

"He does and he doesn't," laughed Tad.

"In other words, Chops is on the fence," nodded Rector. "If we are going to do business I guess we had better get at it."

"Agreed," answered Tad, striding into the store. There the boys got pads and pencils, for they had lost their own supply. They also bought stamps, peanuts and various other things that were either useful or that appealed to their boyish appetites.

Having equipped themselves for writing, the Pony Rider Boys repaired to the porch where they sat down, and with pads on knees began to write, while the loungers gathered about, eyeing the lads curiously. Others were out at the side of the store, looking over the ponies and discussing the party, the like of which perhaps never before had been seen at Hunt's Corners.

"How do you spell torrent, with one or two r's?" questioned Chunky after a few moments of silence, during which the lads had been writing industriously.

"Depends upon the size of the torrent," retorted Rector.

"Was that one last night a single or a double r'd one?" inquired Stacy solemnly.

"I reckon it was a double r," laughed Butler. "You are safe in using two of them in this instance."

"Chunky's writing an article for the paper," suggested Walter mischievously.

"That's right. That's just what I am doing and that's where I get even with you fellows. I can have the last say--"

"Don't you use my name," snapped Ned. "I'm not looking for the kind of newspaper notoriety you would be likely to give a fellow. You tell them all you want to about Stacy Brown, but leave Ned Rector out of it."

"I have," answered the fat boy significantly.

"That's one for you, Ned," cried Tad. "But I wish you boys would keep quiet. I'm writing to Mother and she'll think something is the matter with me, for I've already written 'torrent' twice where it didn't belong and next thing I know I'll be putting in some of Chunky's stuff about last night. Do be quiet. If you don't want to write, go to sleep."

Stacy yawned broadly at the suggestion of sleep. He was ready for sleep at that moment, but his desire to tell the folks at home, through the medium of the weekly paper, through what an exciting experience the Pony Rider Boys had gone, outweighed all other emotions.

The boys had written for a half hour or more when suddenly a shot rang out somewhere off to the northwest. The lads glanced up inquiringly. At first they saw nothing of interest. Then a horseman swung into view, riding at a lively pace. As he drew near he began firing into the air from his revolver.

"Whoop!" he roared.

There was a scattering of the loungers. It was plain that they knew the man. The boys resumed their writing.

"Whoopee! I'm the Bad Man from Smoky Creek! Higher up the creek you go, the bigger they grow, and I'm right off the headwaters!"

"Bang, bang, bang!"

"Turn the coyotes loose! Fer I'm out fer blood and a genwine killing! Whoope-e-e-e!"

"Bang, bang, bang!"

The crack of the six-shooter was almost wholly drowned by the yells of the fellow, but through all this the Pony Rider Boys wrote on as calmly as if nothing out of the ordinary were occurring, though Stacy gave the bad man a glance out of the corners of his eyes now and then. Stacy was ready to run if, perchance, the fellow should turn a gun in his direction. The lads had met with such characters before, and knew that it was not usually the man who indulged in such loud boasts who was to be feared. Still, it was a nerve-racking situation.

Professor Zeppelin and Jim Abs had appeared at the door at the first sound of the uproar, but they beat a quick retreat when they saw who and what was the cause of the disturbance.

"Is--is there any danger to the boys?" stammered the Professor.

"Not unless they stir him up. That's Smoky Griffin, one of the meanest bullies in the whole Blue Ridge. Everybody's afraid of him and I reckon they've got good reason fer being afraid. The kids don't seem to mind him, do they?" wondered Abs.

"The kids, as you call them, are quite able to take care of themselves, even against such a ruffian as that," answered the Professor, proudly. "I hope he will let them alone. They might make up their minds not to endure too much imposition."

Smoky now sat in his saddle, reloading his weapon and leering at the cool youngsters on the porch. To find men, to say nothing of boys, who did not fear him, was such a new experience to Smoky that it fairly hurt him. The ruffian had been a neighborhood bully for years, and was wholly accustomed to seeing men flee when he rode into town discharging his weapons, without any particular concern as to where the bullets went. Lack of awe in anyone injured his abundant self-esteem.

Now that his weapons were reloaded, he again emptied them, driving all of the bullets into the porch posts at a level over the boys' heads.

Still the Pony Rider Boys sat tight, though it must be confessed that they were making scant progress with their letter-writing.

Observing this, the bully, with undue deliberation, slid from his saddle and made his animal fast to the hitching-bar. Then Griffin strolled up to the porch, and grabbing one of Stacy's feet gave the ankle a sharp twist.

"Do that again," drawled Chunky, "and you'll get a kick from the northwest. You make a noise like one of those Germans we licked in France. Say, why don't you go get a job washing dishes in a lumber camp or something instead of trying to make folks think you're a man. Go put on an apron, Bo!"

In another instant such things had started as had never before been seen at Hunt's Corners.

CHAPTER VI

TAD BUTLER IN ACTION

It may have been the tenderness of Chunky's youth, or the look that flashed from his eyes, but Smoky Griffin, after a moment, strode over to Tad Butler who sat calmly writing a letter to his mother.

"Writin' letters?" jeered the bully.

"Your impudence and your grammar are quite in keeping with each other," answered Tad laughingly. "If you consider it any of your business--I don't--then I'll say that I am writing to my mother."

The loungers, overcome by their curiosity, now began slowly creeping out into the open where they might witness what they were sure would follow. The face of Smoky Griffin flushed a deeper red than its natural color at the cool audacity of the boy.

Tad had again turned to his writing.

"None of my business, eh?"

"I do not consider that it is. If you will be good enough to keep quiet until I finish writing, I shall be glad to talk to you."

This was too much. The loungers fully expected to see Tad topple over backwards with a bullet in his body. Nothing of the sort occurred, however. But something else, still less expected, did happen. With a growl, Smoky stretched forth a big paw, snatching the pad and letter from Tad's knee. The bad man grinned broadly as he looked at the written page.

"Dear Maw," he read.

Tad rose slowly, stepping down from the porch. A dull red flush had grown into his cheeks.

"Dear Maw," continued Griffin, after darting a quick glance at the approaching Pony Rider Boy. "I am writing you today to--"

"Kindly hand over that letter," ordered Butler in the quiet tone that to his companions meant trouble.

"Mighty perk today, ain't ye?"

"Hand over that letter!" Tad's tone was pitched a shade higher.



"Hand Over That Letter!"

For an instant Griffin glared into the face of the resolute young fellow who stood confronting him. Then Smoky threw the letter on the ground and trod on it.

"I reckon Dear Maw won't--"

Whack!

Tad had brought the flat of his hand across the fellow's red face in a resounding slap that was heard by every person there. Even Chops, now hiding behind the store, heard it, and his eyes grew large, for he expected to hear the report of a revolver following close upon the slap. In that case it would be high time for Billy Veal to flee.

With a roar of rage the bully reached for his revolver. But his hand did not quite touch the butt of the gun. Ere it had reached the weapon his head was jerked backward in a violent jolt.

Tad smote the ruffian a blow on the jaw that turned Smoky half way around. A quick left-hand swing caught the man on the back of the head, sending him flat on his face.

"Walt, look out for the ponies!" commanded Tad sharply, at the same time stooping over and deftly removing the bully's pistols, which he "broke," scattering the shells on the ground, then tossing the revolvers to the store porch.

Walter, a little paler than usual, walked steadily to where the stock was tied and leaning against the tie rail, one hand on his revolver, awaited further developments. They came quickly.

The loungers, now augmented by a half dozen men who had appeared so suddenly as to puzzle the boys as to where they came from, began to murmur angrily. It was all right so long as Smoky was having fun with another, but now that one of their kind should have been knocked down by a stranger stirred their blood within them.

Smoky was getting to his feet. The blood had gone from his face, leaving it pale under its coat of tan. Reaching for his revolvers he found the holsters empty and Tad Butler standing before him with a sarcastic smile on his face.

"Stand fast, fellows!" directed Tad in a low voice, nodding to Chunky and Ned.

The mountaineers began crowding closer.

"Stand back, men," warned Ned Rector. "This is going to be fair play. The first man who reaches for his gun is going to get his right there and then. We didn't start this row, but we're going to see it to a finish now. The one who gets thrashed gets thrashed, and that's all there is about it."

Ned's resolute voice, backed by a six-shooter in his own hand and another in Stacy Brown's, had its effect. The mountaineers backed off a few paces, muttering. Some were plainly tickled at the insult to the bully, but they, of course, did not express their satisfaction in words. It was not safe to do so just yet. Perhaps Smoky might take his revenge on them after having finished with the slender lad so calmly facing him. They did not believe there was a possibility of Tad's coming out of the fray with a whole skin.

At this juncture Professor Zeppelin came tearing out.

"Here, here! Stop that!" he commanded sternly.

"Keep back, Professor," warned Rector. "The fellow assaulted Tad. I am keeping the others back. You must stay back with the rest."

"But--but--but--"

"The only 'but' that has any influence here is the butt of my revolver just now," answered Ned, never for an instant taking his eyes from the mountaineers.

"Gimme a gun!" roared Griffin.

"The man who tries to give you a gun gets a bullet in his anatomy," answered Rector. "I'll shoot the first man who tries to pass you a gun; then I'll drill you, too," added Ned.

Smoky glared, first at the boys who were twirling their revolvers about their forefingers, then at his friends still further back. It was plain that he could look for no help from his associates. Once more Smoky roared. At least, he could punish the fellow who was responsible for this situation. Smoky made a leap and a wild lunge for Tad, but there was no Tad there. The Pony Rider Boy had leaped aside, laughing lightly.

"Come on. Smoke up! I'm waiting for you!" urged Butler in a tantalizing voice.

Griffin tried it again, but with no better result than before. The bully was thoroughly at home with a gun in his hands, but without a weapon he was as awkward as a sucking calf with its first pail of milk. Already the bully was breathing hard.

"Short-winded, eh?" grinned Tad. "You'll be more so after I have finished with you. It's my opinion that you need a lesson. It will be doing the community a service to give you one and I'm going to do it."

Smoky launched a vicious kick at the Pony Rider Boy. Tad dodged it, and ere Smoky could recover his balance Butler had planted a blow on the man's nose that literally turned that member upward. A second swift blow landed on the same tender spot.

With a wild howl of pain, Griffin began beating the air with his fists, striking; blindly and wildly. This was exactly what Tad wanted. His antagonist had wholly lost control of himself. His was a blind, murderous rage. Butler was playing with him like a cat with a mouse. Now and then the Pony Rider Boy would send in a punch, ever aiming for the damaged nose of Smoky Griffin, and Smoky was spinning about so frequently that he had grown dizzy. He was bellowing like an angry bull, but every time he opened his mouth to bellow, Tad's hard fist smote him on the nose.

Now the Pony Rider Boy got in closer and began beating a tattoo on the bully's face. It was eyes, nose and mouth, now, that got the blows. Tad was showing no preference. It was plain to the other boys that Butler was determined to teach a lesson that Smoky would not soon forget. Tad's face now wore a set grin. He did not appear to be in the least ruffled, but the grin looked as if it had grown on his face and had been there for years.

"Put him out, why don't you?" jeered Chunky.

"Smoky, have you had enough?" asked Tad, stepping back a few paces.

For a brief instant the bully glared through his bloodshot eyes, as if scarcely able to believe his senses. That a slender lad, such as the one before him, should possess so much skill and such a punch--it seemed to Smoky like the kick of a mule--passed all comprehension. But the longer he gazed the more sure was Griffin that he had but to stretch out his hand and crush Tad Butler.

Smoky tried it then and there. As a reward he got three blows, on as many different parts of his face, that sent him staggering backwards.

Tad now saw that he must fight to a finish. Smoky never would give up as long as he were able to lift a hand. For that the Pony Rider Boy admired him.

From that moment on it was a one-sided battle. Griffin's resistance was without effect, though had he been able to get a grip on his slender antagonist it would have ended the fight. Tad swung the blows in so fast that his companions were unable to count them, and at last the bully, Smoky Griffin, sank groveling in the dirt, blubbing and crying like a child who has been thoroughly spanked.

For the moment Tad Butler felt sorry for the fellow, sorry that he himself had been responsible for such a spectacle.

"Get up!" commanded the lad. "Perhaps this may teach you a lesson to mind your own business in the future, and--"

But Tad was interrupted by a howl from the spectators. They broke out into cheers for the plucky lad who had downed the bully of two counties. As quickly as his maimed condition would permit Smoky mounted and galloped away, trusting to his pony to find the way, for Smoky's eyes were swollen nearly shut.

Tad Butler had destroyed forever the power of the bully to terrorize Hunt's Corners.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE WAY TO SMOKY BALD

"The crowd always goes with the upper dog," nodded Rector, as the mountaineers crowded about Tad to congratulate him on his plucky fight. But Tad was too much interested in rescuing the letter to his mother to give heed to the men who clamored to tell him what a brave boy he was.

There were a few among the mountaineers, however, whose faces were dark and threatening. These did not offer their congratulations. They were men who, for reasons best known to themselves, sympathized with Smoky Griffin, but who had not dared to go to his assistance with the ready revolvers of Ned Rector and Chunky Brown so plainly in evidence.

"Come in here and help yourself to anything in my store," shouted Jim Abs from the doorway. "Any galoot that can fit like that without turnin' a hair is welcome to anything that Jim Abs's got. Come right along in, all the rest of you strangers. Hi, men, if them ponies want to drink don't let 'em suffer."

"Thank you," smiled Butler. "There is nothing that I can think of that would make me any happier than a glass of water, if I might trouble you."

"Shore, little pardner. Want a bit of lemon in it?"

"If you will let me pay for the lemon."

"Nary! I reckon you've done me more'n five cents' worth of benefit in getting rid of Smoky Griffin. He won't be around these parts right smart, I don't reckon."

"Then I will take the water without the lemon," decided Tad.

"You'll do nothing of the sort." Jim hustled around, setting out five glasses which he filled from a pump at the rear of

the store. Into each glass he squeezed some juice from a lemon, adding a spoonful of sugar that he dipped from a barrel. He shoved the concoction across the counter grinning good-naturedly.

"Drink hearty, lads."

"My goodness, I'm glad he gave me a glass of that lemonade," gasped Chunky between gulps. "I nearly got lockjaw watching him fix it."

"Say, but you-all can fit," declared Abs, addressing Tad, at whom he gazed in admiring wonder.

"Thank you, sir. That's the very best glass of lemonade I've ever drunk," answered Butler, smiling sweetly. The battle grin had given place to a smile that was almost girlish in its sweetness. It was a winning smile, too, but the person who thought an effeminate nature was hidden back of the smile was likely to be keenly disappointed.

The boys went back to the porch where they sat down to finish writing their letters. Tad's letter to his mother was so trodden with dirt that he was obliged to rewrite it.

"If any more of those bad men come along here looking for a fight, please tell them to wait till I finish my letter, then I'll attend to them," said Stacy pompously as he sat down. "Say, that fellow didn't take his revolver, did he?"

A mountaineer shook his head. Chunky went out and picked up the weapon, examining it critically. He carried the weapon in and handed it to Mr. Abs.

"I reckon you'd better keep this," he said. "Smoke may come along looking for it when he gets his eyes open so he can find the way."

"No, sir, not Griffin. He won't show his face around these parts in a right smart time."

"Then you may have it. I wouldn't tote such a cheap gun as that. Why, he couldn't hit the side of a house with it and do any damage," declared Stacy.

As Chunky emerged from the store he discovered the big eyes of Billy Veal peering around the corner of the building.

"You may come out now," grinned the fat boy. "Circus all over and the concert let out. Perfectly safe for you now. Here, have a banana," offered Stacy, helping himself to one from the bunch on the porch and tossing it to the colored man. "Everything belongs to me around here."

"Chunky, go in and pay for that banana," commanded Tad, glancing up with a disapproving frown.

"But didn't the man say we could have whatever we wanted?"

"You do as I tell you."

"Lend me a nickel, then," begged the fat boy.

"Regular cheap man, you are, Stacy Brown." growled Rector.

"Here's your nickel," said Tad, handing out a five-cent piece. "That makes seventy cents you owe me."

"Why do you want to remind me of it every time? Don't you think I have trouble enough without having to worry over my debts all the while?"

Muttering to himself, Chunky entered the store, laid the five cents on the counter, uttering a deep sigh as he did so, then returning to the porch threw himself down and began scribbling. After a few minutes of this Stacy's head began to nod. He recovered himself with a start, grinned sheepishly, and started writing again. Five minutes later he lay on his back on the porch, both legs hanging over, snoring loudly.

He was still asleep when the boys, having finished their writing, went in to post their letters. This done they started for their ponies, Chops having, in the meantime, packed the supplies. The Professor was about to awaken the sleeping boy when Tad whispered to him. The Professor grinned.

"Mr. Abs, when we are off yonder by that rise of ground you wake him up, will you?"

"Sure," chuckled the storekeeper. "You'll see some fun then."

"How far is it to the rise?" asked Tad.

"Nigh onto three miles."

"Good. That will give him a run for his money. Thank you for all your kindness. We may be back here for further supplies later on. We've got two good, healthy food-consumers in our outfit."

The storekeeper said he would be glad to see them at any time. They had spent nearly twenty dollars with him, so of course he would be glad to see them again. He didn't care if they came back for more supplies next day.

In the meantime the party quietly rode away, settling down to a gallop after they had ridden far enough from the store so that the hoofbeats should not awaken the sleeper. While all this was going on the loungers sat about watching the sleeping Chunky and grinning broadly. They were appreciating the joke, and they knew they were going to have some fun.

Smoky Griffin's friends had taken their departure some time since, so there was no apprehension felt as to their interfering with Stacy. The fat boy, in all probability, would not have awakened in hours had not someone carelessly stumbled over him when the party were drawing near the rise referred to by Butler.

Chunky sat up grumbling.

"Say, fellows, what do you want to wake me up for--"

Stacy rubbed his eyes and gazed around him somewhat bewildered. Thinking the boys must have gone into the store, he got up and hurried in. Mr. Abs was unusually busy and it was fully two minutes before he found time to lend an ear to Stacy's urgings.

"Where's my party?"

"What, you here yet?" demanded the storekeeper in well-feigned surprise.

"I reckon I am. Where's the rest of the crowd?"

"Don't you know?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be asking you, would I?"

This line of reasoning seemed to strike Jim Abs forcibly, for he nodded his head until Chunky feared the storekeeper would dislocate his neck.

"Where are they?"

"I reckon they're on their way to Smoky Bald."

"Smoky Bald? On their way to Smoky Bald?" shouted the fat boy.

"Sure. Didn't you know that?"

Chunky regarded the storekeeper keenly for a few seconds, then bolted out through the door. Shading his eyes he gazed off across the plateau. There in the far distance he could just make out a body of horsemen jogging along.

"Is--is that my crowd?" he demanded, turning to the grinning faces of the mountaineers.

"I reckon it is, boss," answered one.

"That's what I call a mean trick!" shouted the fat boy, making a dash for his pony. In the meantime the pony had been moved around to the other side of the store. Chunky howled when he failed to find the animal where he had left it, and it was some five minutes later when he discovered the horse. It did not take the boy many seconds to leap into the saddle, and urging his horse he went dashing off across the plain in pursuit of his party, shouting and occasionally shooting up into the air to attract their attention.

A chorus of yells from the mountaineers followed him, but Stacy Brown was too angry to listen. Already the pony's neck was flecked with foam, Stacy urging the animal on to renewed efforts by frequent applications of the pointless rowels which he rubbed vigorously against the little animal's sides.

"There he comes," shouted Tad as a report from Stacy's revolver reached their ears.

Glancing back the boys saw a cloud of dust rising between them and Jim Abs' store.

"Ride for it! We can get out of sight before he tops the ridge," shouted Tad.

Professor Zeppelin, sharing in the youthful enthusiasm of the moment, touched spurs to his own horse and the party swept away.

In the meantime Stacy Brown, the sweat rolling from his face, was pounding across the plateau.

CHAPTER VIII

STALKING THE FAT BOY

The country on the other side of the rise was rugged, dotted with huge rocks and well wooded with second growth. It made an ideal hiding ground for one who wished to conceal himself.

"Cut off to the right," shouted Tad.

"Watch out that he doesn't go by us and get lost," warned the Professor.

"You all keep quiet," directed Butler. "I'm going to have some fun with Stacy. Maybe it will teach him to be more watchful. Chunky would go to sleep even if he knew a band of Indians were creeping up on his camp."

The outfit swerved to the right as suggested by Butler, and soon was well screened by rocks and foliage. It was some little time after that before Chunky topped the rise.

"Hoo-oo-oo-oo!" he called in a long-drawn shout. "Hoo-oo-oo-oo!"

Not a sound greeted his call. Chunky fired his revolver into the air. Instead of stopping to look about more carefully, and evidently not suspecting another trick, Stacy dashed down the incline at a perilous pace, leaping small obstructions in order to take a shorter course to the point where he thought his party had entered the thicket.

Stacy had not penetrated into this very far before he pulled up and sat pondering deeply. Even yet he did not think far enough to realize that the boys would not desert him in this way.

Riding slowly into a thinly wooded space the boy fired the remaining chambers of his revolver, listening intently, then, with a grunt, recharged the weapon and got down from his pony.

"I'll stay here all the rest of the day. If they want me they can come back after me, that's all. If they don't, why I'll just go back to Hunt's Corners. I can get something to eat there. Yes, and the fellows will think something's happened to me and they'll be in an awful stew. I'll pay 'em back for this trick, I will. I guess they can't get so funny with me without getting the worst of it in the end."

Tad Butler, in the meantime, had left his pony and run towards the place where Chunky had entered the rugged, wooded stretch. Tad finally got near enough to be able to overhear the fat boy's angry mutterings. In fact, Butler was near enough to have roped Stacy. He thought of doing so, at one time, but decided that it would give Chunky too much of a fright. Then again, the fat boy might send a bullet Tad's way in case he were to make a miss with the rope. Tad, having stalked his prey as silently as a panther, had not even disturbed Stacy's pony. But now Butler observed that the animal was pricking up its ears, tossing its head as if it had scented something.

"Hang that pony. Has he discovered me?" thought Tad.

"Whoa there!" shouted Chunky. "Do you want to run away and leave me, too? Well, if you do, you just go on. I don't

ask any odds of a horse, I don't. I can walk and I can get along without the rest of that crowd."

A faint noise to the left of Tad called his attention sharply in that direction. The sound was so faint that it might have been caused by a bird alighting on a treacherous small stone. At least something alive had caused it. The listening boy was sure of that.

Crouching lower, Tad listened, every faculty bent to the task of determining what had caused the slight sound. Chunky's continued talking made the task somewhat more difficult.

"I actually believe some other person is stalking him," muttered Tad. "I wonder if Ned has followed after me? No, he wouldn't come from that direction. He would not be likely to do so."

"Ho--ho--hum," yawned Chunky. "I suppose I might as well take a nap while I'm waiting for something to turn up. Guess I'll tie the critter, then stretch out on this rock. It feels nice and warm, but it's pretty hard."

The fat boy actually did what he had suggested. After securing the horse, he lay down on the rock, pillowing his head on his arms.

It was at about this time that Butler came to the conclusion that some person other than one of his own party really was creeping up on Stacy. From Tad's position he was unable to see what was happening on the other side of the rock behind which he was crouching, so, taking a long chance, he crept around it on all fours like an ape.

A stick snapped under a foot less than ten yards away. Tad put on a little more speed. Perhaps some harm was intended the fat boy. If so, Tad proposed to know about it and take a hand in the affair himself.

Suddenly the lad discovered what had caused the disturbance, and he nearly betrayed himself by an exclamation as he made the discovery. There, cautiously creeping up on the drowsy fat boy, was a man. The man's face was swollen and bloody, but the swollen eyes were fixed on the form of Chunky Brown in a malignant stare.

"Smoky Griffin!" gasped Tad under his breath.

The bully had discovered Stacy. Perhaps the fellow had been lying in wait for the party and had been a witness to their running away from Brown. If so he had shown more cleverness than Tad had given him credit for. The situation was certainly a critical one--for Stacy.

In his hand Smoky held a stone that must have weighed at least ten pounds. It was plainly his intention to smash the stone down on the sleeping fat boy. Tad Butler was thankful that he had thought to play a further trick on his companion. Perhaps that very prank had saved Stacy's life, or would save it, for Tad had already made up his mind what he was going to do.

"I'll give Smoky a surprise for the second time today," thought Butler, cautiously slipping his rope from his belt, straightening out the coils wholly by the sense of touch, never for a second removing his gaze from the face of Smoky Griffin.

Finally, having got the rope in shape for a throw, he took a light grip on the honda, or slip knot, then stood crouched as if for a spring.

Smoky straightened up. Tad was taking a great chance, but Chunky was taking even greater.

The bully drew back his hand. He was not more than six feet from where Stacy Brown lay asleep.

Suddenly the big loop of the Pony Rider Boy's lasso wriggled through the air. Smoky's keen ears caught a sound. He started to turn, then he uttered a yell and began clawing frantically at the nameless terror that had pinioned his arms to his side.

With a yell of fright Smoky toppled over on his side, then rolled to his back as Tad leaped away and began dragging and tugging at the rope.

Then another yell was heard. This time it was the fat boy's.

"Oh, wow! Wha--what is it?" he howled.

Just then his glances caught the livid face of Smoky writhing on the ground. Stacy did not see the rope, but he realized

at once that Griffin was there to do him harm. With another yell Stacy let go three shots into the air.

"Yeow!" howled the fat boy.

Professor Zeppelin and the other two boys heard both the shots and the yells. Tad's little joke was working out better than they had thought. Laughing and shouting they put spurs to their mounts and rode at a fast gallop towards the spot where they decided Chunky had met his surprise.

Ned was the first to reach the scene, with the Professor following close after him, Walter Perkins and the grinning Billy Veal following hard behind. Young Perkins brought his pony up sliding.

"What--what--" he gasped. "Professor!"

Ned was out of his saddle in a flash.

"Put up your gun!" he shouted, as Chunky began making threatening motions with the weapon.

"That's right, Ned. Hold him!" cried Tad, as Ned threw himself upon the fallen bully.

"What's this? What's this?" demanded the Professor, gazing perplexedly at the sight.

"Nothing, only there were two of us planning to give Stacy a surprise. This is our old friend, Smoky Griffin, otherwise the fallen bully. Get up!" Smoky got sullenly to his feet.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the incisive voice of Professor Zeppelin.

Smoky made no reply.

"Stacy, what was this man trying to do to you?"

"I--I don't know. I--I was asleep."

"He was asleep," mocked Rector in a deep voice. "Of course he was. He always is. I'm going to organize a first aid to the sleepy corps."

"There won't be any corps, 'cause we'll all be patients," retorted Stacy quickly.

Tad answered the look of inquiry in the eyes of the Professor by explaining what had occurred.

"I believe the fellow intended to crush Stacy's head with the stone. It is fortunate that I got here ahead of him. What do you think we had better do with him?"

"We will talk that over, Tad. All being agreeable we will first seek a more favorable location for camping. Is there water down in the gully yonder, guide?"

"Nassir, yassir. Ah reckon."

"Go look for it. When you find water return here and lead us to it."

"I would a heap sight rather be led to a lemonade stream," declared Stacy.

"You will be wanting hot and cold water on tap next," laughed Ned.

"I have them already," answered Stacy.

"You have?"

"Of course I have. I'm in hot water all the time, and there's plenty of cold water in the stream. Say, I've got a bone to pick with you fellows, but--I've forgotten what it's about."

Billy Veal had ridden away in search of water while the two boys were talking. At the same time the Professor and Tad were observing the prisoner, who had been tied to a tree, and were conversing in low tones.

"I think we had better let him go in the morning, Professor. We shall have to take our chances of more trouble from him."

If he were wanted by the authorities, I shouldn't be in favor of this move. As it is, we can't bother with him."

"Yes, I agree with you. But why wait until morning?" urged the Professor.

"Because he might hang around after dark and get into mischief. If we send him away in the morning we shall have an opportunity to get a good distance away from the fellow before night."

"That is good judgment," agreed Professor Zeppelin. "It shall be as you suggest. Hasn't that lazy guide returned yet, boys?"

"He is coming now, Professor," answered Walter.

"It strikes me it is about time."

"Did you find water?" called Ned.

"Nassir, yassir."

"Tad, how do you translate it?"

"He has found water," answered Butler.

"I've got it," cried Chunky. "If he'd said 'yassir, nassir,' that would mean that he had not, wouldn't it?"

"You have solved the problem, Chunky," nodded Tad.

"Guide, lead the ponies to the place, and if the camping ground is suitable, prepare to pitch the camp. We will join you soon."

"Yassir."

"Hey, Chops, you forgot something," called Stacy.

"Yassir?"

"No, sir, 'nassir.'"

"I think we might as well be getting over to the camping ground, Professor," suggested Tad. "It is understood, then, that Smoky is to remain with us until morning?"

"Yes, if you think best."

The boy walked over and untied the bully. Griffin started to walk away. Butler laid a hand on his arm.

"Not so fast. We are not going to lose you yet awhile."

"What are you goin' t' do?"

"Going to keep you with us for a time," smiled the Pony Rider Boy.

"You ain't got no right t' hold me."

"I think you are right about that. Neither did you have any right to interfere with us at Hunt's Corners, nor to try to shoot me, which you surely would have done had I not taken your pistol away. If you think we ought to let you go, why I'll do so after I have turned you over to a sheriff. Which shall it be?" questioned Butler sweetly.

The prisoner grunted. His rage threatened to get the better of him, though he was making strenuous efforts to control himself. Tad motioned to the man to come along, which Smoky did, walking sullenly by the side of the Pony Rider Boy, though he was not bound. He was as free as ever save that he knew any attempt to run away would meet with a quick, stern check. He had had evidence of the Pony Rider Boy's prowess with his fists. Smoky looked enviously at the pistol in its holster at Tad's side. The boy observed the glance in the direction of the weapon, but made no comment.

"Keep your pistols where they won't be a temptation to Smoky," whispered Tad to the boys after they had reached the camping ground, which was on a gentle slope leading down to a mountain stream. They understood, and were on their

guard from that time on.

Griffin sat sullenly watching the pitching of the camp. No one appeared to be giving the slightest attention to him, yet he knew he was being watched just the same.

Twenty minutes sufficed to pitch the tents, after which duffle-bags were stowed in the peak of the triangle formed by the rear of the tents, beds made, and all preparations completed for the night.

"How's that for record time, Smoky?" chuckled Tad, turning to the prisoner.

"All right," grumbled Griffin.

"Come, cheer up," urged Tad. "Don't be a grouch. We don't like to have grouches around this camp. The fat boy is our official grouch. We can't stand more than one at a time."

"I guess I'm no more a grouch than some other folks I know of," protested Stacy. "Say, I know now what that bone is I want to pick with you. Why did you fellows run away from me this afternoon?"

"Run away from you?" exclaimed Ned.

"Yes, run away from me. You needn't look so innocent. You know you did and you did it on purpose, and you nearly got me killed. That--that gentle soul over there was about to smash my head with a stone. He would have done so, too, if I hadn't woke up and scared him off with a shot or two."

"You have another guess coming."

"Do you mean to say you didn't run away from me?" demanded Stacy indignantly.

"I haven't said. We were ready to go and we went, that's all there is to it."

"No, that isn't all there is to it, Ned. There's some more to it, but the other part hasn't come to pass yet," declared Chunky significantly. "That means you, too," he added, turning to Griffin. "I'll have something to say to you also for wanting to smash me with a rock. I ought to take it out of you right here and now. I would if you weren't so bunged up already. I don't like to pitch into a helpless man."

Smoky growled long and deep. Tad signaled Stacy to keep away from the prisoner. About half an hour later an early supper was spread.

"Come, Griffin, join us," urged the Professor.

"Don't want no supper," grunted the prisoner.

"You must eat," insisted Tad, stepping up to him. "Because we are not good friends is no reason why you shouldn't eat. It will not impose any obligation on you. If you want to fight right after you have broken biscuit with us there's not the least objection in the world to your doing so."

With an unintelligible grunt the fellow got up and dragged himself over to the blanket on which the supper had been spread. Perhaps it was the savory odor of the bacon and the steaming coffee that so tantalized the prisoner as to cause him to be willing to sit down with his enemies and eat. At least Smoky's appetite had not suffered by his unfortunate experiences. Even Chops opened his eyes on seeing the mountaineer stow away food. Chunky watched the fellow almost admiringly.

After supper the prisoner was permitted to smoke by the campfire. Tad Butler was shrewd. He hoped by this friendliness to disarm the bully so that the fellow, when released, would go on about his own business and give them no further trouble. Butler did not know Griffin. His hope was vain. Revenge deep and deadly was smouldering in the heart of the mountaineer. At that very moment he was planning how he might get even with the boys who had so humiliated and punished him. They would hear from Smoky Griffin again and in no uncertain tone.

CHAPTER IX

REVENGE ALMOST AT HAND

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smoke, that we shall have to tie you tonight, but we will make you as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. You shall be untied in the morning, though I warn you not to play tricks on us. We may appear easy, but you ought to know we aren't so easy when our good nature has been abused," warned Tad as he tied the hands and feet of the prisoner, placing the man under a blanket laid across four stakes driven into the ground. "There, I think you will be reasonably comfortable."

Griffin had offered no resistance to the tying. Perhaps he knew it would be useless to do so. There were too many hard-muscled young men about to make resistance profitable, so Smoky submitted and was tucked in his little bed for the night.

"Is the prisoner well secured?" asked the Professor.

"I think so," answered Butler. "I will keep an occasional eye on him during the night."

The camp was soon in slumber. Stacy Brown's breathing could be heard clear and distinct above all other sounds. Tad from his bunk commanded a view of the prisoner, and now and then the lad would awaken and glance out at the man lying there, apparently asleep. But Griffin was not asleep. He lay alternately staring at the fire and at Tad's rifle which stood against a tree some twenty feet from where Smoky lay bound. Leaving his rifle out there looked like carelessness on the part of the Pony Rider Boy.

After a time Smoky began to wriggle and grunt. He was trying to free himself of his bonds, believing that the camp was sound asleep. And so it was, with the exception of Butler, who now lay wide awake observing the efforts of the prisoner. Tad did not believe the fellow would be able to free himself and was therefore amazed when all at once Smoke threw up his hands clear of the rope that had bound them together. Next the prisoner began tugging at the rope around his ankles.

All this time Tad lay back with hands under his head, curiously watching the man. Then Smoky's feet came free, but the mountaineer did not get up at once. Instead, he lay panting and peering about him to see if his efforts had been observed. Apparently they had not.

Smoky began creeping toward the rifle standing there against the tree, though Butler did not appear to understand what the man was trying to do. About this time, however, Tad got up and yawned audibly. Griffin instantly flattened himself on the ground.

The Pony Rider Boy stepped out without even casting a look in the mountaineer's direction and sleepily made his way to the campfire, which he prodded listlessly, then piled on more wood until the fire began to crackle and snap, sending a shower of sparks up into the night air.

Smoky eyed Tad suspiciously for a moment, then began wriggling towards the rifle against the tree. Tad, apparently unconscious of his danger, still stood gazing dreamily into the crackling flames of the campfire.

Griffin half raised himself and stretching forth his hands he grasped the weapon and drew it towards him, almost hugging the gun in his delight. At last Smoky Griffin was himself again, and his swollen eyes narrowed as he gazed at the boy standing there before him.

A moment of hesitation followed. Suddenly the bully threw the weapon to his shoulder and pulled the trigger.

No report came. Smoky pulled the trigger again, but with no better result. He uttered a growl of rage. Tad turned slowly towards the mountaineer, grinning broadly.

"After you have finished trying to shoot me, put my gun back where you found it, if you don't mind," suggested the Pony Rider Boy easily. "You may thank me for preventing your being a murderer. I've been watching you all the evening. I saw you when you first began trying to get clear of the ropes. I saw you when you started for the rifle. That didn't worry me, for I drew the cartridges before putting the gun there about supper time. Smoky, you've made a monkey of yourself and you've shown what an easy mark you are. Put down that gun!" The last words were uttered in a stern voice.

For a brief second the Bad Man hesitated, then with a growl he clubbed the rifle and sprang for Tad Butler. A few feet only separated them. Tad was now in greater peril than he had been when the desperate man was drawing a deliberate

bead on him. Still the lad did not appear to be disturbed in the least.

"Don't come any nearer, Mister Man!" warned Butler in a calm voice.

Smoky Griffin found himself gazing into the muzzle of Tad Butler's revolver. This brought the mountaineer to a quick halt, his eyes blazing with passion. Slowly the rifle was lowered from its clubbed position, Smoky still grasping it by the barrel.

"Put the gun back where you found it," directed Tad.

The conversation had been carried on in a low tone, so as not to disturb the camp. Tad was still grinning. He had enjoyed the little scene immensely, besides which he had taught the former bully of Hunt's Corners another wholesome lesson.

"Now stand where you are, that's a good little boy. Don't try to run. You might be stopped so suddenly that you would take a tumble. Ned!"

One call was sufficient. Ned Rector came stumbling out, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Wha--what is it?"

"If you don't mind, I wish you would tie our friend here--"

"But, how did he get loose?"

"He managed it all by himself, then he tried to shoot me. I knew he would attempt to get away. We will tie him up this time so he won't get loose. Secure him to that tree, Ned, and tie him good and tight, but not so tightly that it will hurt. Smoky, you sit down with your back against that tree. You will be quite comfortable there and it is only a few hours till daybreak now," suggested Butler.

Smoky did not obey at once. Thereupon Ned pushed him backwards against a tree. In that instant the mountaineer's arms gripped Rector around the waist, pinioning Ned's arms to his sides, and though Ned struggled to free himself he might as well have tried to wriggle from the grip of an iron vise. The boy thought his ribs were being crushed in.

Ned did not utter a sound, but his face was red and he was struggling desperately, while Tad stood grinning. Butler had expected this very result. It was as excellent a lesson for Ned as had been the previous lesson for the desperado.

Tad strolled over to them.

"Now, Smoky, you have done about enough for one night. Let go and sit down there. You know what will be done if you don't obey orders."

Griffin was too full of ferocious rage to obey. He was determined to inflict all the damage that he could, on the boy in his grip. Tad stepped quickly behind the bully. Placing a hand around over Smoky's forehead, the other hand pressing on the mountaineer's Adam's apple, Butler gave the head a quick backward jerk.

The fellow's grip on Ned relaxed almost instantly. He staggered back choking and gasping, whereupon Tad thrust the ruffian from him and leaped back out of the way of those powerful arms.

"Sit down before I put you down!" commanded the Pony Rider Boy sternly.

"Let me at him, let me at him!" yelled Rector.

His cry aroused the others. All hands tumbled out shouting.

"What's going on here?" thundered Professor Zepplin, charging into the scene clad only in his pajamas.

"Just a little bout with our friend," answered Tad, laughing. "Ned, you keep your head. Get down there as I told you, Griffin!"

The fellow sank down, with a hopeless expression on his face, but his eyes were full of menace. Tad stood guard over him while Rector with set, angry face gave the rope several twists about Smoky's body, finally securing the rope to the other side of the tree.

"There, I'd like to see you get away from that hitch, my slippery friend," announced Ned.

"There's nothing to tell, Professor, except that Griffin managed to release himself. I don't think he will try it again. He has learned that we are not easily caught napping," said Tad.

"He is an ungrateful wretch," growled the Professor. "Griffin, I am amazed that you should act like that after we have treated you so kindly. We ought to turn you over to an officer. I am not sure that we shall not do so on the morrow."

"Turn in, you people. I will hang around until morning," directed Tad, who went to his tent and lay down. He did not wholly trust to the prisoner's bonds, so the lad kept up his vigil until morning when the others began to stir, after which he dozed off for a catnap.

The prisoner this time was not wholly released for his meal. His hands were freed, but that was all. Still he ate a hearty breakfast, after which he was brought over to the campfire while Chops was clearing away the stuff preparatory to packing and getting under way.

"We have very little to say to you this morning, Griffin," began the Professor, after clearing his throat, as he always did before making an important announcement. "Where do you live?"

"None of your business."

"It is immaterial. I was merely about to suggest that you return to that home, wherever it may be, and stay there. Be warned and keep away from this outfit. You will get into serious difficulties if you harass us further. We don't want to see you about our camp again while we are on the Ridge. Tad, will you liberate the prisoner?"

Butler did so.

"You may go," he said with a wave of the hand toward the fellow's pony, saddled and bridled ready for him close at hand, Smoky did not even glance at them. With lowered head he climbed into his saddle, put spurs to his mount and quickly disappeared from the scene.

CHAPTER X

BISCUIT AND MYSTERY

"There, I hope we have seen the last of that ruffian," exclaimed the Professor as Smoky rode away.

"I am afraid we haven't, Professor," answered Tad, with a shake of the head.

"Why--why, what makes you think that?"

"He is a vengeful man. He is already plotting to get even with us. However, there's no use to worry about him. We will take care of him if he comes around our outfit."

"Yes, we'll take care of Smoke," jeered Chunky. "I wonder if there are any more like him in these parts?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," returned Tad. "You did very well in helping to hold the other mountaineers off yesterday, Chunky. But you spoiled it all twice."

"How?"

"By going to sleep on the job. Never go to sleep unless there is good reason for doing so."

"There was good reason. I should say there was," protested the fat boy.

"What was the reason?"

"I was sleepy."

"Surely, you could not ask a better reason, Tad," said the Professor with a grim smile.

"I've nothing more to say?" laughed Tad. "That argument is unanswerable."

Ned suggested that they get under way, so they mounted and rode away towards Smoky Bald, that huge towering mountain, rising up into the sky nearly seven thousand feet. The Pony Rider Boys were now approaching what was known as "The Land of the Sky," and their spirits were fully as high as the name. About them the country was becoming more rugged, making progress slower and slower, but they did not mind.

By this time it was unusual to see a human being, though at rare intervals they came upon a mountaineer's cabin. The occupants of such always were suspicious of the strangers, and the boys cut short their calls with merely passing words of greeting.

For two days following the departure of the bully they had pressed on and on. But now another disturbing factor had come up to irritate them. Their food was most mysteriously disappearing. No matter how many biscuit they baked, these were sure to disappear within a few hours.

A similar state of affairs, though not to the same extent, had existed on their way through Smoky Pass. Now it had sprung up again. At first Tad suspected Stacy Brown and his appetite; then the guide came in for a share of suspicion, but not a clue was the lad able to find. He thought he had checked the losses when he ordered all the reserve stores piled in the corner of his tent with his duffle-bag, but the mystery still remained unsolved.

"It's my opinion that there's something going on around these diggings," declared Chunky as they were sitting about the campfire one evening.

"There is no doubt about that," replied Tad. "If you can find out just what is going on you will be doing the Pony Rider Boys, as an association, a real service."

"I had a dream last night," began Chunky.

"Did you dream that you were living in marble halls?" chuckled Rector.

"No, I couldn't dream anything so pleasant when you were snoring in the next tent. I've had the same dream for three nights running. And, fellows, it was an awful dream. I know it means trouble for someone."

"Well, what was your dream?" asked Tad.

"I don't want to hear it if it is another of your old chestnuts," declared Ned.

"Go on, tell it, Chunky," urged Walter.

"It was a terrible dream," replied the fat boy in a deep, thrilling voice.

"Well, well, surely it couldn't have been any more terrible than this suspense," interrupted Butler.

"I dreamed--I dreamed--" Stacy paused to gaze feelingly at his companions.

"You dreamed? Yes?" reminded Rector.

"I dreamed--I dreamed I saw three blind men leading a one-eyed horse to water."

"Oh, pooh!" scoffed Ned Rector.

"Three nights," continued Stacy, "did I dream of this nerve-racking scene. Don't look at me like that, William Véal! That's just the way the blind men stared at me."

"Go on," laughed Tad. "What did the three blind men and the one-eyed horse do?"

"They went down to the creek and took a drink," crooned Stacy, gazing steadily at the wide-eyed Chops. Chops was actually pale about the lips. "Then--then I dreamed another--the most awful of all."

"Yes, yes?" pleaded Walter, now really worked up to a high pitch of excitement.

"For three nights running I dreamed that I saw a black cat chasing a three-legged rat through a field of red clover. Br-r-r!" The last word came out with explosive force.

Billy Veal leaped to his feet with a yell. The Pony Rider Boys burst into a roar of laughter, with the exception of Stacy, who sat as solemn as an owl. Chops was trembling, for, like most of his race, he was superstitious.

"If I might make so bold as to inquire," said Tad after quiet had once more been restored, "why was the black cat chasing the three-legged rat through the field of red clover?"

"The cat thought the rat had the biscuit that have been stolen from this camp, I reckon."

This was the signal for another outburst, in which Billy Veal took no part. The guide was too thoroughly frightened to be amused. His superstitious nature had been strongly appealed to.

"It means that there's trouble brewing in this outfit. I shouldn't be surprised if some one were going to die. I'm sure it will be the villain who has been stealing our biscuit."

"No, that isn't what it means," interrupted Rector.

"What does it mean, then?" demanded Stacy.

"It means that you have been overloading your stomach for the last three nights before turning in. I am beginning to think it was you who stole and ate the stuff."

"You must be a--an oracle. That's it. You're one of those dream books," retorted Chunky. "Now seeing you are an oracle, what would it have meant had the rat been running through the clover without any legs at all? Answer me that if you can, Mr. Dream Book!"

"Very simple. Almost childish. That would mean that instead of eating biscuit before going to bed, you had been eating mince pie."

"You are almost human, Ned," grinned Chunky. "But you don't know a gnome when you see one."

"A gnome?"

"Sure thing. Those were gnomes--the real spooky, spinky kind that give you the shivers up and down your back when they're out gnoming. Chops knows what a gnome is, don't you, Chops?"

"N-n-n-nassir, yassir," chattered the guide.

"Don't, for goodness' sake, Chunky. He'll run in a minute," begged Butler.

"And--and that wasn't all," continued Stacy. "I heard the cat utter a name, and the rat had a face just like--"

"What did the cat say, and--"

"The cat said, 'Meow!'" jeered Ned.

"No it didn't. The cat said 'Veal, Veal,' just as plainly as you could imagine," nodded the speaker.

Chops fairly gasped.

"Yes, but what did the rat look like?" urged Tad.

"Well, it looked to me like a rat," answered the fat boy solemnly.

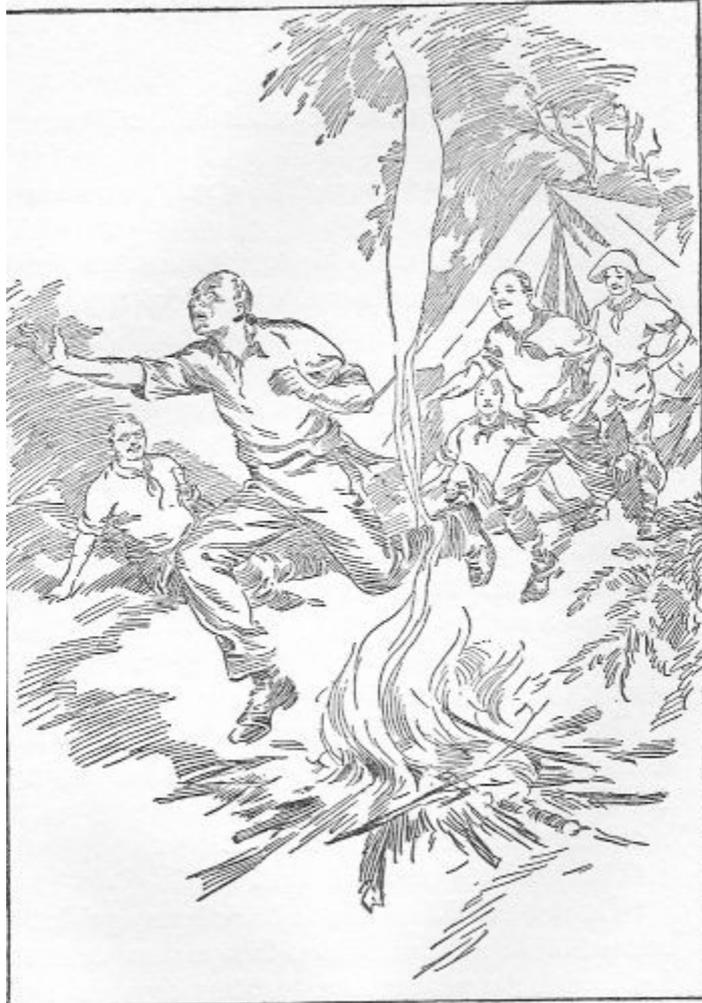
"You will all have the nightmare tonight if you don't choose a more cheerful topic for discussion just before turning in," warned Professor Zepplin.

"Yes, change the subject," urged Rector. "I don't want to dream of four-legged rats and blind mice, and besides, Chops is on the verge of nervous prostration."

Chunky got up and stretched himself. He strolled over to where Billy stood leaning against a rock.

"The rat had your face," he whispered sharply in the ear of the guide.

Chops uttered a blood-curdling yell and with a leap cleared the campfire and started racing for the tall timber.



"There He Goes!"

"There he goes," wailed Ned.

"After him!" shouted Tad.

"Guide! Guide! Come back here, guide!" roared the Professor. But Chops was on fleet feet, with four shouting, yelling boys in hot pursuit.

"That's the last we shall see of our guide," moaned the Professor, sitting down heavily.

CHAPTER XI

AN INTERRUPTED JOURNEY

The yells of the Pony Rider Boys, instead of inducing Chops to stop only caused him to run the faster. Stacy Brown was soon at the tail-end of the procession. Tad was in the lead, Ned Rector close upon his heels, with Walter Perkins a good thirty yards behind Ned.

"Stop, you ninny!" shouted Tad. "Come back here."

"N-n-nassir," floated back the voice of the guide. Chops had enough. He was more frightened than ever before in his life. He believed that the fat boy had really had the dream, and that trouble was brewing for Billy Véal.

"We'll never get him," gasped Rector.

"Yes, we shall. Get your rope. We'll have him. We'll chase him all night but we'll land him. Chops! Oh, Chops!"

"Save your breath," jeered Ned.

"I'm going to. Oh, what I won't do to that guide when I do catch him!" gritted Tad.

"Yes, when you do."

Butler put on a fresh burst of speed, touching the ground only with his toes, as he ran, leaving Ned still farther behind.

"Gracious, I didn't think Tad could sprint like that," gasped Rector.

"Wait for me," howled Chunky, now far to the rear.

The boys got to laughing so heartily at this that Chops gained several rods on them, but Tad quickly closed up the gap and was soon drawing down on Billy Véal at a killing pace. The guide was a good runner, but he did not have the staying powers possessed by Tad Butler. Tad, no doubt, could have run all night had such a thing been necessary, for he was a strong, healthy boy with not an ounce of extra flesh on his body, and his muscles were of the quality of pliant steel.

Tad now drew out to one side and a few minutes later he passed the man they were chasing, though Véal did not know of this. The colored man came tearing along at almost express train speed, when Tad's rope wriggled through the air. The throw was a true one. The loop landed fairly over the head and shoulders of Chops, was drawn taut by the runner himself, and in the next instant Billy Véal stood pivoting on his head on the ground.

"Gracious, I hope he hasn't broken his neck," cried Tad. "I--I didn't think he would go down so heavily as that."

"Where is he? Where is, the guide?" shouted Ned Rector, coming up with a splendid burst of speed, and not breathing hard at all.

"Look out, or you'll step on him," warned Tad.

"Where is he?" repeated Ned.

"Chops is standing on his head just ahead of you behind those bushes. Get hold of him so I can let up on the rope."

With a yell of triumph, Ned threw himself on the colored man, who was too dazed from the shock of his fall to offer much resistance.

At this juncture Walter Perkins came in on a trot, followed after an interval of a minute or so by the shouting, puffing fat boy.

"You are to blame for this, Chunky," growled Ned, trying to be stern.

"It strikes me that you are sitting on Chops yourself. You surely can't blame me for that," retorted Stacy.

"Here, you, get up and come back to camp with us," commanded Tad.

"Yes, Chops, the gnomes will get you out here," reminded Stacy.

"Stop it! You'll have him on the run again," rebuked Tad.

Chops looked up, wide-eyed.

"Hit jes' lak dat, fer fae'," muttered Billy. "Ah done seen dem myself."

"There! What did I tell you?" demanded Chunky triumphantly. "He 'seen dem himself.' Did they have biscuit in their mouths, Chops?"

"Yassir, nassir. He ain't say nuffin' 'tall. He jess look lak dat." The guide made big staring eyes, as if peering at something in a world unseen by the rest.

"Say, quit that! You'll give me the creeps soon," declared Ned. "Are we going to take him back to camp or must I sit on

him all the rest of the night?"

"Let him up, Ned," nodded Tad, recoiling his rope. "If you try to run, Billy, I'll rope you again. Do you want me to rope you some more?"

"Yassir, nassir."

Chops was shivering as he got up and started slowly back towards camp, casting apprehensive glances at every bush he passed. A wild yell from the bushes bordering the trail they were following nearly sent the guide off on another sprint. He surely would have run had not Tad grabbed him by the arm and given him a shaking.

"Stacy Brown, if you do that again you will have to answer to the Professor. Fun is fun, but the fun's all played out of this affair. Come along here, Billy."

Billy was marched into camp, set down by the fire, and ordered to remain there till told to get up. The Professor tried to assume a stern expression, but the attempt was a failure, finally ending in a chuckle, in which Chunky, who had just arrived, joined with his familiar "haw, haw, haw."

"Oh, stop it!" commanded Ned. "You make me think I'm back among the Missouri mules. What are we going to do with this fellow, Professor?"

"I'll tell you what to do with him," spoke up Chunky. "Give him a tostie wostie--in other words, a petrified biscuit, and tuck him in his li'l crib where the little gnomes can't tickle his feet, and he'll be all right after he gets to sleep," suggested the fat boy without so much as the suggestion of a smile on his face.

"Guide, you must not take the jokes of these young men seriously. They were just fooling," began the Professor.

"They? You mean Stacy Brown," interrupted Ned.

"I wasn't fooling anyone. He saw them himself. Didn't you see the gnomes sitting on a rock, Chops, and didn't they make faces at you because you were running away?" persisted the fat boy.

Billy nodded weakly, moistening his lips with his tongue and swallowing a lump in his throat. Such a hopeless expression of fright appeared on his face that the boys, unable to contain their mirth longer, uttered shouts of laughter, in which the dignified Professor joined.

"You see! I told you so," nodded Stacy.

"Young man, I shall have to ask you to cease playing pranks on the guide. We can ill afford to be without a guide in this wilderness of trees and rocks."

"A guide?" laughed Tad.

"Yes, a guide."

"Too bad we haven't one," muttered Stacy.

"It is to you I am speaking, Master Stacy. You must not tantalize Billy. Let him alone. Have I your promise that you will do so?"

"If I promise I have to, don't I?" questioned the fat boy.

"Certainly you do."

"Then I guess I won't promise," he replied after a brief reflection.

The Professor gave it up with a shrug of his shoulders. He asked the guide if they should tie him up for the night or if he would lie down and behave himself. Billy decided that he would prefer the latter, so they left it that way. Chops was then permitted to return to his duties, getting the camp to rights for the night, but it was observed that he gave a nervous little jump every time he heard an unusual sound.

"I'll bet he sees more than a black cat in his sleep tonight," Tad confided to Rector.

"I don't care what he sees so long as he doesn't snore. And I give you due notice that if Chunky persists in snoring as he has been doing lately either he or I will have to sleep out in the bushes out of sound of the camp. Why, Tad, I am on the verge of nervous prostration from loss of sleep," declared Ned.

"You surely look it, too," replied Tad with a grin.

"If Stacy chases Chops out of camp again I am quite positive that it will be Stacy Brown who will sleep in the bushes," resumed Ned in a tone of voice loud enough for Stacy to hear.

"Not so that anyone will notice it, he won't," called back the fat boy.

The night passed uneventfully. On the morrow, bright and early, the party continued their journey into the heart of the mountains. That day being Saturday, according to their usual practice, the Pony Riders went into camp to remain until Monday morning. This also gave the ponies a much-needed rest.

For this weekend stay, the tents were pitched in a deep, sombre canyon, that reminded the boys of Bright Angel Gulch in the Grand Canyon where they had encountered so many exciting experiences.

It was near the middle of the forenoon on Sunday when a stranger walked into camp, moving in long, determined strides. In the crook of his right arm he carried a rifle. The boys greeted the newcomer pleasantly, at the same time offering him the hospitality of a cup of coffee.

"I don't want no coffee," grunted the stranger, with a reckless disregard for the English language. "I want a heap sight more of you, though."

"First, may I ask who you are?" questioned Tad Butler.

"I'm not here to answer questions. I reckon you'll have to answer some instead."

"Let's have the questions, then," smiled Tad. "But if you won't answer questions why should you expect it of us?"

"Because I'm an officer, and I'm here on business."

"Business! What business?" blurted Stacy, jumping up. "Are you after Chops?"

"Humph! More likely I'm after all of you," rejoined the stranger. "But that depends."

"If you are an officer I wish you had happened along a couple of days ago," said Tad. "We had a lot of trouble with an imitation bad man, Smoky Griffin. Know him?"

"No. I'm not that kind of an officer."

"He's a corporal in the Home Guards," guessed Chunky.

"My man," broke in Professor Zeppelin, with extreme dignity, "will you be good enough to explain just what your business is?"

"Yes. I'm a government officer, and I've come to give you notice to quit, and right smart at that. It's your move, and you'll have to get up and dust out of these parts. If you don't, I'll lock you up in jail, to start with. Then, after you've waited a few months for the court to sit, you'll find that you have worse medicine to take. Is that plain enough?"

"I—I don't understand your attitude," stammered Professor Zeppelin.

"Mebby this will mean something to you," said the newcomer, holding up a furry object.

"What is it?"

"Looks like the paw of the black cat that I dreamed I saw chasing the three-legged rat through the field of red clover," declared Stacy.

Tad motioned to the fat boy to be silent.

"It is a deer's foot, isn't it?" he asked.

"You've guessed it, young man."

The thought came to some of them that perhaps they had a crazy man to deal with. The Professor decided to humor their caller.

"Very interesting, very interesting," he nodded. "You shot him, eh?"

"I did not."

"No? Then I do not understand what particular interest attaches to the foot."

"I reckon you would if you wanted to. You've seen it before," grunted the man.

"I beg to differ with you. I have not seen a deer foot, let alone the animal belonging to it, in some months. Why do you insist upon this?"

"Because one of your party shot the deer. You've got deer inside of you at this particular minute and--"

Stacy rubbed his stomach and rolled his eyes.

"I wish I had," murmured the fat boy.

"Now just what do you want to say to us?" demanded the Professor, considerably irritated.

"That you'll have to get off this Ridge right quick or it'll be the worse for you," announced the stranger in a commanding voice.

CHAPTER XII

FACING NEW OBSTACLES

"Leave the Ridge?" cried the boys in chorus.

"Leave these mountains? Is that what you mean?" demanded the Professor indignantly.

"I reckon that's it."

"Why so? Why should we leave here until we have finished our journey?" interjected Tad, eyeing the man keenly.

"Because I say so. I'm not talking to you."

"But I am talking to you, sir. I am one of the interested parties, you see, and I want to know."

"I'm from Missouri, also," spoke up Ned, stepping forward.

"I'm one of the leading citizens of that state, too. I'm not a voter, but I can make just as much noise as any voter in the state when it comes to the cheering," declared the fat boy, pushing his way into the semicircle about the visitor, who was seated on a rock with his rifle over his knees.

"Maybe you fellows think this is a joke. Anybody'd think so from the way you act," snapped the officer.

"Far from it," replied the Professor sharply.

"Well, you've got to git, that's all, and right smart at that."

"How do we know you are an officer?" demanded Butler.

"Because I say so."

"That's no proof," declared Ned boldly.

"Your authority--what is your authority?" urged the Professor.

"I reckon this is authority enough," declared the man, tapping his rifle significantly.

"We've got some of the same kind, several of them in fact," answered Tad, with a good-natured laugh. "When it comes to that I think you will find our authority fully as convincing as yours."

For the moment matters looked serious. The man's face turned red. He shifted his weapon a little and glared at the young man who had really uttered a challenge.

"Whether or not you are an officer I do not know," went on the Professor. "However, I have a right to know why you make this singular request."

"No request about it. I told you to mosey."

"But why?"

"You're on government property."

"Well, what of it?"

"You've been shooting on government property?"

"I deny it," thundered Professor Zeppelin, slapping his thigh with the flat of his hand.

"We may have been shooting, but not at game," explained Tad. "Professor, are we on a government reservation?"

"I was not aware of the fact," was the reply, made in a half-sarcastic tone. "I'll look at the map. Go and bring it, Tad."

"Stay where you are!" commanded the officer.

"My, but he's touchy, isn't he?" wondered the fat boy. "Guess we'll have to serve him the same way we did Chops last night, rope and sit on him."

"What is your name?" asked Professor Zeppelin, regarding the man shrewdly.

"Never you mind about my name. Uncle Sam is a good enough name."

"Depending upon who wears it," scoffed Ned Rector.

"See here, I don't want to hear any more of your talk, not from any of you. You're an impudent lot of youngsters, though you're old enough to know better."

"You will kindly direct your conversation to me, my man," broke in the Professor. "I am in charge of this party and wholly responsible for anything they may do. In the first place, I deny that any of us has shot any game on the Ridge. In the second place, I know of no law that will prevent our passing over a government preserve, though there are preserves where firearms are not permitted."

"This is one of them," interrupted the man.

"Where do the preserves end and where do they begin?" demanded Tad shrewdly.

The mountaineer hesitated. For the moment he appeared confused. Then he made answer.

"I reckon a few miles this side of Hunt's Corners and on to the other side of old Smoky Bald."

"Nonsense!" exploded Butler. "I don't believe it."

"Quiet, Tad," rebuked the Professor.

"Say, you Mister Man, we don't talk business on Sunday," spoke up Stacy. "Come around tomorrow morning and we'll talk to you during business hours and give you all the talk you want, with a little something else if you are looking for trouble. I guess you're another of those bad men from Smoky Creek, and the further up you get the worse they are."

The face of the officer turned white with anger.

"I agree with the young man," nodded the Professor. "You may call here tomorrow morning, stranger. We shall be here until nine o'clock, after which we shall no doubt be on our way toward Smoky Bald, provided we do not change our minds. By that time we shall be in a position to talk more intelligently with you and perhaps you on your part will be able to converse more courteously. Good-day."

The Professor uttered the words with more than his usual firmness. Always firm and decisive in his manner of speaking, the present utterance was calculated to impress him to whom it was directed.

The supposed officer started, shifted his gun, then rose angrily.

"I haven't got time to argue here all day--"

"Nor have we," replied Professor Zepplin evenly.

"I reckon my boss will have something to say when I report how you used a government officer."

"If you could show us any good reason why we should be ejected we should be glad to comply with your command. As it is I do not believe you have the least right in the world to order us from the Ridge. If such a right existed, you wouldn't have to order us off. We should go without being told," said Professor Zepplin.

"If ye don't keep shet I'll arrest the whole pack and parcel of ye."

"I should esteem it a favor if you would," retorted the Professor belligerently. The boys wanted to cheer Professor Zepplin, but they did not think that would tend to soothe the spirits of their visitor.

"I'll give ye till tomorrow morning to get off the range," declared the man. "If you're here it will be the worse for you. I reckon I haven't got anything more to say."

"I am glad of it. You have said quite enough already," snorted Professor Zepplin.

Without another word the stranger got up and strode away. Tad stood irresolute for a moment, then he skulked away on the trail of their late visitor.

"Tad, Tad!" called the Professor. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be back in a minute. I'm just going over here a piece. Don't worry. I may learn something," answered the boy, trotting back so that the stranger might not hear what he was saying.

"I reckon I'll go with you," announced Ned.

But Tad merely shook his head, and disappeared around the corner of a rock. The lad came upon their visitor much sooner than he had expected. In fact, the Pony Rider Boy had a narrow escape from being discovered. Had he not thrown himself flat on the ground, the mountaineer surely would have seen him, for at the moment of discovering the man the fellow was turning to look back.

Tad was screened by a clump of bushes, through which he was peering. The late visitor started on; then, when he considered it safe to do so, Tad followed. A short distance from the camp the visitor paused, giving a low whistle. Another man rose and came forward to meet him, much to the lad's amazement.

"Good gracious, the woods appear to be full of these fellows. I wonder what it means?"

Tad's question was not to be answered at that moment. After holding a brief conversation the two men walked away together. Butler saw them mount their ponies that had been secreted in among the trees and ride away.

"A precious pair of rascals," decided the Pony Rider Boy, hurrying back to camp.

"Well, you came back with a whole skin, did you?" grinned Ned.

"Did you discover anything, Tad?" questioned the Professor.

"Yes, sir, I did, though I don't see that the knowledge I gained is going to be of any great use to us."

"What is it?"

"There are two men. The man who was here met another fellow in the clearing over yonder. They talked together a little and then rode away. It's my opinion that something is going on in these mountains and that it might be a good idea for us to keep a weather eye open."

"What did I tell you?" demanded Stacy.

"About what?" questioned Tad, turning to his companion.

"About the blind men and the one-eyed horse, and the black cat and the three-legged rat," answered the fat boy triumphantly. "I knew something was going to happen. Chops knew it, too. Those gnomes weren't roosting on the rocks for nothing. I guess I know something about gnomes. Look out for the black cat. He's a trouble-maker."

"We have important matters to discuss," interrupted Professor Zeppelin. "Be good enough to cease your nonsense, Stacy."

"Nonsense? Nonsense? Well, I like that. Here I give you warning of trouble and you call it nonsense. I'd like to see any weather bureau hit off the weather as closely as I hit off trouble."

"You cause more than you hit off," answered Tad. "Professor, what do you make of this?"

"Nothing. I don't know what to think of it."

"Nor do I, but as I said before, it seems to me that, if that fellow really is an officer, he must be crazy. Oh, I forgot, we were going to look at the map."

"To be sure. You will find it in my dufflebag."

Walter ran to the bag, returning with the map, which they straightened out on a rock, placing four small stones on the corners to keep the map open.

"There is the southern line of the government preserves," said Tad, pointing.

"About where are we now?" asked Rector.

"I should say about here," answered Butler, laying a finger on a dark spot on the map.

"Here is Smoky Bald, here is the pass in which we are encamped, and yonder is the rise of ground over which we came on our way from Hunt's Corners. According to my reckoning, we must be a good twenty-five or thirty miles to the south of the government line. I guess we've got our friend now."

"He's a scoundrel!" cried the Professor.

"He is. He must be," declared Tad. "But, what have the men in mind?"

"That remains to be seen," replied the Professor. "Perhaps their only object is to get rid of us, and perhaps--"

"Perhaps they are planning some crooked business," finished Butler. "What have you decided to do, Professor?"

"What do you boys wish to do?"

"We don't want to be turned back if we can help it. So long as we are convinced that the fellow is a fraud, I say let's go right along regardless of him and his crooked business," urged Tad.

"Are you all agreed on this, boys?" demanded the Professor.

"We are," cried the Pony Rider Boys.

"Then the matter is definitely settled. We move tomorrow morning, the same as usual, and if our friend sees fit to interfere with us we will show him that we are well able to take care of ourselves, that we are not tenderfeet," declared the Professor belligerently.

CHAPTER XIII

AN EXHIBITION OF SHEER PLUCK

"No, we will not break camp until nine o'clock," said the Professor when, on the following morning, Ned proposed that they get under way immediately after breakfast. "We promised our friend that we should be here until that hour, you know."

"Then I think I will scout around to see if anything is doing," suggested Tad, who immediately hurried from camp. He returned half an hour later with the information that there wasn't a human being within a mile of them so far as he had been able to learn. It then lacked an hour of nine, so the boys passed the time with packing, joking and talking. They were not greatly troubled, nor would they have been had they known what was before them that day.

Professor Zeppelin, too, was filled with the spirit of the occasion. The old soldier never shrank when it came to a battle, though naturally he felt the responsibility of having four boys to look after, even though those boys were pretty well able to take care of themselves, as they had demonstrated on numerous occasions.

An inventory of the supplies showed that everything was accounted for. This, Stacy declared, was because he had frightened the three-legged rat away from camp. He said he had a worse fright in store for it if it showed itself around that outfit again. Chops looked very solemn at this. The fright the guide had had served to chasten and subdue him. This was not lost on the Pony Rider Boys, nor was the significance of it, either.

"Nine o'clock. Time to move," announced the Professor finally, closing his watch with a snap. "We will start now. Are you ready, boys?"

"All ready," answered the lads in chorus.

"All ready to start--something!" added Chunky.

"No, we will not start anything, my boy," rebuked the Professor.

"Stacy is quite given to slang of late," laughed Tad.

"I have observed as much," answered the Professor dryly. "I trust you will cut out slang, young man." The Professor eyed the fat boy sternly.

"I trust you will, too, Professor," retorted Stacy.

"I--I use slang?" demanded the Professor indignantly.

"Yes. You said I must 'cut out' slang. If that isn't slang, my dictionary is ahead of the times," returned Stacy triumphantly.

"He has you there, Professor," chuckled Tad.

"He surely has," agreed the other boys smiling broadly.

"Young men, I admit it. I am properly rebuked, and I assure you the offense will not be repeated. I promise to refrain from anything of the sort in the future, and I shall expect you to do the same."

"Well, I won't promise, but I'll try," drawled Stacy. "If I promised, honest Injun, I'd have to keep my promise. You know I don't like to be roped with a promise. It's like being tied to a tree. A fellow can't let himself out when he wants to."

"You'll have plenty of opportunity to let yourself out, I am thinking. Something do--" began Tad.

"Ah--ah!" warned Chunky.

"I guess I nearly forgot myself, didn't I?" grinned Butler.

"Yes, you'll have to cut it--"

"Whoa, Chunky!" shouted Ned. "There you go again."

"Hopeless! Hopeless!" groaned Professor Zeppelin. "But that's right. Correct one another and you will soon overcome the habit. We are forced to live a semi-barbarous life, but that is no reason why we should forget either our manners or our English."

"We shouldn't were it not for Stacy Brown," declared Rector.

"That's right. Lay everything to me. I'm tough. I can stand it. But I'm the prophet of this outfit; I'm a necessary encumbrance."

"Mount!" commanded Tad. "Billy, did you bring that bundle of dry sticks for kindling the fire?"

"Nassir, yassir."

"Then, forward march!"

"Giddap, you old bundle of bones," jeered Chunky, giving his pony a smart unexpected slap.

The pony kicked and squealed, giving Stacy a lively tussle for a few moments.

"Why do you stir him up so?" rebuked Tad. "That isn't horsemanship. You act like a beginner."

"He always is that way in the morning. It's his way of showing his pleasure at having me on his back. Whoa, there, you cayuse!" shouted the fat boy.

Stacy lost part of his pack, necessitating a halt while he got down to repack and take a fresh hitch. Finally having arranged it to his satisfaction the fat boy mounted. His companions had waited with long-suffering patience, and there were sighs of relief when Stacy was once more ready. The party moved off at a leisurely walk, for the ground was rough and the trail not easy to follow.

A close watch was kept ahead as far as they could see, and on all sides as well. But nothing of a disturbing nature occurred until near noon, when Stacy, having ridden off to one side, scared a doe, which fled through the brush making a great crashing, nearly frightening the fat boy out of his wits.

Tad and the Professor rushed to Stacy's assistance. Their disgust was great when they discovered the cause of the uproar. It was then decided that Chunky must keep close to the party and try to behave himself.

After a brief rest following the noon meal they once more mounted their ponies and set out. They had been on their way less than an hour when, riding out into an open space, they halted rather suddenly.

As they entered the open space two horsemen rode in on the opposite side. The men carried rifles across their saddles, and came directly toward the Pony Rider Boys' outfit.

"There he is!" exclaimed Tad.

"Who--who--who?" demanded Stacy.

"The black cat," answered Rector under his breath.

Professor Zeppelin recognized one of the men instantly. The Professor's lips closed firmly. One of the horsemen was the man who had claimed to be an officer when visiting their camp and ordering them to leave the Ridge.

"Well, I see you fellows are still here," he said mockingly as he rode up to the outfit.

"Your eyes do not deceive you, sir," answered the Professor coldly.

"Where do you fellows reckon you are going?"

"In the first place, we are not fellows," resented Tad, his face flushing. "In the second, we do not consider it any of your affair where we are going."

"The young gentleman is right," added the Professor. "You have no right to interfere with us. What do you want?"

"I want you to turn your nags about right smart and head in the other direction. This is a preserve, and--"

"I deny it!" snapped Professor Zeppelin. "It is not a preserve and what is more I don't believe you are an officer. Will you stand aside and permit us to go our way?"

"I will not."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I reckon I'll wait here till I see you headed t'other way."

"Then you will wait a long time," exclaimed Butler. "We are not going to turn about. We are going straight ahead, and we are going to keep on going until we are ready to head the other way, and--"

"I reckon you won't do nothing of the sort." The mountaineer nodded to his companion, who started to ride around to one side of the outfit.

Tad saw the purpose of the movement at once. They proposed to make a flanking movement where they would have more advantage so far as position was concerned.

"If you please, stay where you are!" commanded Tad sharply.

"What--what! You reckon to give me orders?" demanded the man furiously.

"I'm telling you two to stay where you are if you know what's good for you. We have had about enough of your nonsense. Professor, are we going to stand for any more of this foolishness?" demanded Tad heatedly.

"No, not much, Tad. But be patient for a moment. I want to talk with this man further. Do I still understand you to persist that we are on a government preserve?" he asked, turning to the mountaineer.

"I reckon I've told you that before and I'll tell it to you again."

"Say it as many times as you choose, sir, if it pleases you," answered Professor Zeppelin sarcastically. "We heard you the first time. It's getting to be an old story now."

"Well?"

"I deny that this is a preserve. I further state that in my opinion you are a scoundrel. If you are not you will resent the accusation, and I am ready to meet any such resentment," added the plucky Professor, permitting one hand to drop lightly to his pistol holster.

The movement was not lost on the mountaineer. Nor was the fellow to be deterred from carrying out his purpose. He shifted his rifle into a more convenient position.

"It's the black cat," muttered the fat boy. "And we'll all be lame ducks in a minute."

"Keep steady, lads," warned the Professor in a low tone.

Tad nodded, taking in his fellows in the same nod as indicating that they were to take no action until ordered to do so.

"Professor, I'm going on," announced Butler. "We may stand here all day arguing at the present rate."

With that Tad clucked to his pony and started, picking his way through the growth in the open space.

"You stop where you are!" commanded the mountaineer.

"You stop me if you dare," retorted the Pony Rider Boy. "Come along, Professor."

Instead the Professor sat grimly in his saddle, eyeing the mountaineer sternly. The latter half raised his rifle, bringing the muzzle to bear on the advancing Tad.

"Oh, fudge! Put that gun back in your boot!" scoffed Butler. "You know you don't dare to use it. You know very well that you would get the worst of it if you dared to pull the trigger."

"Are you going back?" roared the mountaineer.

"No, I'm going forward," answered Tad, putting spur to his pony and starting at a jog trot. He was headed directly towards the mountaineer, and the latter's pony took a step aside in order to prevent a collision. The muzzle of the mountaineer's rifle almost grazed Butler's sleeve as he trotted past the man who had threatened to shoot him.

"Come on, fellows. Are you going to camp there in your saddles?"

For answer the Professor and the three lads started to follow their companion. It was at this juncture that the mountaineer's companion took a hand in the affair and changed the situation instantly into a much more serious one. Up to this time Tad's sheer grit had overcome the desperate purpose of the alleged officer. The intervention of the other man had put a new complexion on the affair.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROFESSOR TAKES A HAND

"Make 'em dance!" shouted the second man.

Two revolvers banged. Tad's pony leaped up into the air, for the two shots had been fired right under the pony's hind feet. Ere the lad could subdue the little animal two more shots had landed under the fetlocks of the spirited animal.

"Stop that!" thundered the Professor.

"Don't be alarmed, Professor. They are only bluffing," called Tad. "I'll take care of these gentlemen when I get my pony subdued."

Bang, bang!

Two bullets fanned the feet of Professor Zeppelin's mount. This was more than the old fighter could endure. He whipped out his own revolver and began peppering the ground under the feet of the mountaineers' horses. It was the turn of the assailants' animals to cut up now. And they did, threatening to unhorse their riders.

At the moment when the Professor let go his bullets the supposed officer was about to fire another shot under Professor Zeppelin's mount. But the pony leaping, spoiled the mountaineer's aim. One of his shots bored a hole through the crown of the Professor's hat. A bullet from the Professor's revolver fanned the cheek of the mountaineer.

"Hold your fire!" shouted Tad to his companions.

The mountaineer, not waiting to reload, began tugging at his other weapon. Tad drove his pony straight at the man who, by this time, was leveling the pistol at Professor Zeppelin. The Pony Rider Boy hit the weapon with his quirt. The bullet went high above the head of its intended victim. The second swing of the quirt was even more of a surprise to the mountaineer than had been the first. The quirt landed on the fellow's cheek with such force as to lay it open and draw blood.

Before the man could recover, Tad Butler had fastened upon his collar, and the fellow was jerked from his saddle and landed heavily on the hard ground.

"Cover the other man!" shouted Tad.

Four guns were pointed at the other mountaineer, who was so dazed over the sudden and unexpected turn of affairs that he seemed to have lost power of action of any sort.

In the meantime Butler had quickly disarmed the man whom he had so cleverly unhorsed, taking possession of his weapons and throwing them away.

The lad stepped quickly to the still mounted rider and walking right up beside him stretched up a hand.

"Give me that pistol!" commanded the lad.

The horseman hesitated. The boys held their breath. They expected to see Tad Butler shot where he stood. Nothing of the sort occurred. The man glanced quickly at the menacing weapons of the Pony Rider Boys, down into the resolute, fearless face of Tad Butler, then shoved the weapon, muzzle first, into Butler's face.

Tad didn't even wink.

"The other end to, if you please," he warned.

With a grunt the horseman turned the gun about and threw it rather than handed it to the victor.

"Now jerk that rifle out of your boot and drop it on the other side of your horse. Be quick. There will be some real shooting here if you dilly-dally any longer. We've stood all we're going to take from you ruffians."

The Pony Rider Boys gave a yell as the mountaineer's weapon dropped to the ground. By this time the supposed officer had scrambled to his feet. He was white with rage. He started for the weapons that Tad had taken from him.

"Steady, my friend!" warned the Professor. "This weapon in my hand might--might, you understand--go off unexpectedly. Right about face and get into your saddle. Mount!"

"I'll have the law on you!" roared the defeated mountaineer.

"Then why don't you? You say you are the law. Take us!"

"Get out of here, both of you, and don't you dare show your faces again," commanded Butler.

"And before you leave," added the Professor, "let me say that at the first opportunity I'll have the sheriff on your trail. Now go!"

With the howls of the delighted Pony Rider Boys ringing in their ears the two mountaineers rode away as fast as they could drive their ponies.

"Now where's your black cat?" demanded Tad with a grin.

"Oh, he's chasing a two-legged rat through the chaparral," answered the fat boy carelessly.

Professor Zeppelin wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a savage swish of the handkerchief.

"The scoundrels!" he exclaimed, making a strong effort to control himself. "The scoundrels!"

"I agree with you, Professor," nodded Tad.

"It's my opinion that we had better get out of this country," declared Walter Perkins.

"We shall not. I am going on now, even if they bring in a regiment to put us out!" fairly shouted Professor Zeppelin.

"Hurrah for the Professor! Three cheers for the Professor!" cried Ned. The boys gave three ringing cheers and a tiger.

"That will do, boys. We will be on our way now," said the Professor, having regained his composure.

"Are you going to leave the weapons of those men here, Tad?" asked Walter.

"Yes, but I'm going to fix them so they won't be of much use to their owners," replied Tad.

The lad, after drawing the charges from the guns, hammered them over a rock until the barrels of the rifles were bent and twisted and the butts broken, rendering the weapons utterly useless. He then took apart the revolvers and after damaging the parts so that the pistols could not be used heaped the remains of the mountaineers' arsenal on the rock over which he had broken them.

"I guess those guns won't do any damage," grinned the Pony Rider Boy. "I'm ready for the hike now, fellows."

The hike began at once. Even Chops, who had fled at the first indication of trouble, now came out from his hiding place and, mounting his horse, joined the procession.

"I reckon we've given those fellows a scare that will last them for a time," announced Tad, after they had traveled a

short distance from the scene of the conflict. "But it was only a near fight after all. They hoped to frighten us. I don't believe they intended to do us harm."

"Yes, and I am surprised at you, Professor," reproved Stacy.

"Why?"

"I never knew you were such a savage. Why, if we hadn't restrained you, you would have hurt somebody. Don't ever let me hear you advising me to control my temper."

The Professor interrupted with an exclamation of disgust.

"I wish I knew what is in the wind," reflected Tad. "However, I don't suppose we shall know the motive for this attack. If ever we do you will see that it is some piece of rascality."

"I am of the same opinion," agreed Professor Zeppelin. "I wish we knew where to find a sheriff or a constable, or whatever they may call them in this region."

"Why don't you get a telephone?" suggested Chunky.

The boys jeered.

"Yes, why don't we?" demanded Ned. "Just the very thing! Professor, if you don't mind I'll run over and call up the sheriff and--"

"Tell him you've discovered the black cat," finished Stacy. "Br-r-r!" said the fat boy, chancing to catch the eye of Billy Veal.

Billy exhibited signs of a panic.

"Let the guide alone," commanded the Professor. "We have had quite enough trouble resulting from your pranks."

"That's right, lay it all to me. I can stand it. That's what you have me along for--to take the blame for everything else that the rest of you don't want to stand for."

"Oh, pooh! Can't you take a joke?" laughed Ned, riding up and slapping Stacy on the back. "You know we are only taking advantage of your giving us a chance to have fun with you. This outfit would be tame as fishing in a washtub if it weren't for you, Stacy Chunky Brown."

Chunky regarded Rector with round eyes.

"Do you mean that, Ned Rector?"

"Of course I do."

"Boo-hoo!" mocked the fat boy. "That's the first kind wor-r-d I've had since I left my happy home in Chillicothe. Give me your kind old hand, Ned Rector. May I never hold a dirtier one!"

"There! See! You won't let me be good to you. Remember, I tried to make amends for a lot of things I've said to and about you, but you wouldn't let me. This is the last time I try to make up. Do your worst."

"I will," agreed Chunky solemnly.

"You mean you have," called Tad.

"No, I mean I will."

"All right, only for goodness' sake don't try it on me."

"There are indications of gold here!" The Professor's voice was calm and analytical.

"What?" shouted the boys.

Professor Zeppelin was leaning from his saddle, keenly scrutinizing the rocks at the side of the trail.

"I said, there are indications of gold in the quartz rock here--"

"Gold! Gold! Lead me to it," shouted Stacy. "I need some right now. Show it to me!"

"Kindly curb your emotions, Stacy," rebuked the Professor, eyeing the fat boy sternly.

"I need that gold," insisted Master Brown, unabashed.

"Please hand it to him, Professor," urged Tad. "Then Stacy will be able to pay what he owes me."

"Always that reminder of debt!" snorted Chunky indignantly. "What does a debt amount to between friends?"

"That isn't a very honest view to take, Stacy," teased Butler,

"Honest?" sputtered Chunky. "Tad Butler, I'm honest, and you know it! I owe you a few dimes, and I'd sooner owe them to you all my life than cheat you out of the money."

But Tad wasn't listening. He was off his pony now, bending near the Professor, and listening intently to what that scientific gentleman had to say of the gold signs.

"As to whether there is gold enough here to amount to what miners call 'pay dirt,'" Professor Zeppelin continued, "I don't care to say just yet. Gold is plentiful in these mountains, yet there is rarely enough of it found in one place to pay for the trouble of getting it."

"Show me the gold," pleaded Chunky.

"Here is color," replied the Professor, resting a fingertip on a dull yellowish streak.

"I don't see the gold," said Stacy, after a hard stare.

"You're not used to the sight," jibed Tad. "Now, Walter's father is a banker, and I'll wager Walter has seen a lot of it at the bank."

"Only a few bushels of it at a time," said Walter dryly. "Of course a bushel of gold is a tame sight."

"That's enough! That's enough! I can't think in such large amounts. Pints are about as far as I can go when it comes to gold," retorted Stacy.

"Pennies, you mean," suggested Ned mischievously.

Chunky gave him a withering glance, then turned his attention to what the Professor was saying. The Professor was chipping away at the rock with his little geological hammer, carefully selecting samples of the ore, which he tucked in his coat pocket for future examination.

"Guide, do you think you would be able to lead us to this spot again were we desirous of returning here?"

"Nassir, yassir."

"He means that he could," interpreted Butler. "If he couldn't I could. I can follow any trail that I have been over. Is it so interesting as all that, Professor?"

"Mind you, I am not saying that it is. After I have made a test I shall be in better position to answer that question. Guide, has anyone, to your knowledge, discovered gold hereabouts?"

"Yassir; Ah doan know. Ah nebbah found no gold heah--nebbah found no gold nowhere. Nassir."

The boys shouted.

"He is just like Chunky. Pennies are his gait," scoffed Ned.

"I thought we'd agreed to cut--to stop using slang," reminded Stacy.

"Ned, Stacy is right. He has properly rebuked you this time," laughed Tad.

"Yes, sir. He did catch me napping, didn't he?"

"There he goes again, Professor," shouted Chunky.

"Well, I am not so sure. One would, indeed, have to draw the line very finely to class 'catch me napping' as a slang expression. As a matter of fact, it may be so, but I should hardly go so far as to characterize it as such," differed Professor Zeppelin.

Ned winked at Stacy, but the fat boy, holding his chin high, pretended not to see the wink.

So interested was the Professor in his find that he decided to make camp for the night in that vicinity. Tad and Walter were sent out to choose a suitable site for pitching the tents. They found an ideal spot by a trickling stream of water that oozed from a crevice in the rocks, falling into a natural rocky bowl, almost if the bowl had been hewn to hold the sparkling fluid. Of course Tad saw at once that the water had worn away the rock, thus forming the bowl. Many years had been required to wear away the stone, all of which set Tad Butler to thinking over the wonders of time as well as those of nature.

They pitched their camp there that night. But the night was not destined to pass without some further excitement. Excitement had come to be almost a necessary part of the daily routine of the Pony Rider Boys, and they counted that day a dull one that held no thrills.

CHAPTER XV

THE GHOST OF THE TULIP GLADE

A large number of varieties of the trees of the Blue Ridge region were to be seen from their camping ground of that night. There were yellow and gray birch, hickory, the bull bay, and best of all, the giant tulip tree, one of the largest and most beautiful of the trees in all the great Ridge country.

It was in a lane of tulip trees that the camp of the Pony Rider Boys was pitched. The sky being overcast, Tad had put up a tent for the guide while Chops was engaged in setting the camp to rights in other directions. This tent was located next to the one occupied by Stacy and Walter Perkins. Stacy regarded the arrangements with a satisfied grin, which Tad shrewdly interpreted.

"Look here, Chunky, don't you try to play tricks on that poor guide tonight," warned Butler.

"Poor fellah!" mocked Stacy, "What am I going to do if I dream of blind horses and black cats?"

"Get up and stick your head in the spring. That will wake you up."

"I guess I'd be awake before I got to the spring. That isn't a joke, Tad. That's just an imitation of a joke."

"Don't you dare stick your head in the spring," admonished Ned. "I have to drink that water."

"So do the horses," retorted Stacy. "You haven't heard them find any fault, have you?"

"That's a fact, I haven't," admitted Rector sarcastically.

"Perhaps that is because the horses hadn't thought of it in that light," suggested Walter.

"Great head, great head," cried Stacy. "But confidentially, Tad."

"Yes?"

"We've missed some more biscuit," whispered the fat boy.

"How many?"

"Twenty since breakfast."

"Didn't we eat them for dinner?"

"Not a bisc."

"Hm-m! You are quite sure you didn't help yourself?" questioned Tad quizzically.

"Help myself? Help myself?" demanded Chunky indignantly. "Do I look as if I had twenty biscuit inside of me?"

"I can't answer that question," laughed Tad. "But to return to what I was saying, are you going to behave yourself tonight?"

"About what?"

"About frightening Chops," insisted Tad.

"I can't promise anything about my dreams. If I dream I can't help that, can I?" demanded the fat boy.

"I'll tell you how to help it," spoke up Rector. "Go to bed on an empty stomach. If you will do that, I promise you that you won't dream a single dream."

"I just love to dream," murmured Stacy, twiddling his thumbs and gazing soulfully up to the tops of the great tulip trees.

The Professor interrupted at this juncture to say that he thought they should post a guard that night lest the mountaineers come back.

Tad said he had a plan that he thought would answer fully as well. His plan, as explained to his companions, was to splice their ropes and draw them around trees close to the camp, placing the rope about a foot above the ground.

"Hm-m-m-m!" reflected the Professor.

"In the darkness the rope would not be discovered, and one trying to get into camp would surely trip over it," further explained Butler. "This, you understand, would make a racket that would awaken the camp."

"Excellent! Excellent!" approved the Professor, rubbing his palms together enthusiastically. "I shouldn't be at all surprised to hear that one day you had invented something really worth while."

"Try your skill on inventing an appetite regulator," suggested Ned. "You could try it on Chunky."

"No you don't," retorted Stacy indignantly. "You don't try experiments on my food-consuming machinery. It works quite well enough as it is, though I shouldn't mind if it had a little greater capacity."

No one laughed, though a pained expression might have been observed on the faces of three Pony Rider Boys.

"If you had thought of the rope plan earlier, it might have saved some of us from sleepless nights," declared the Professor. "What a surprise it would be to an intruder were he literally to fall into our camp headfirst."

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Chunky. "Wha--what's the matter? Wasn't it time to laugh?" he demanded, observing the eyes of the Professor fixed reprovingly upon him.

"Yes. A most excellent plan," continued the Professor, ignoring Stacy's flippant remark.

"I'll fix it up right away," said Tad. "Pass over your ropes, fellows. If we rope anyone tonight it will be by his feet rather than over his head."

The ropes were quickly spliced and put in place, forming an almost invisible barrier about the camp. After Tad had finished his task, Stacy fell over the rope to test it, bringing down upon him a torrent of rebuke, for he had nearly pulled the barrier down.

"Don't you dare do that again," warned Tad. "I don't propose to have my work spoiled just to please your curiosity."

"Pshaw! Wasn't the rope put there to fall over?" demanded the fat boy.

"Yes. Of course, but--"

"Then, what are you growling about?"

"Oh, nothing," answered Butler hopelessly.

The Professor shook his head as if argument were a sheer waste of time.

It was quite late when the last of the boys turned in that night, for there was much to discuss, much to wonder at in the strange actions of the mountaineer who had ordered them from the Ridge.

During the talk Chunky went to sleep by the fire. He was awakened suddenly when Ned, who had gone to the spring for a cup of water, poured some of the almost ice-cold water into the fat boy's open shirt front at the neck. Chunky leaped up, uttering a howl, and bowling over the Professor who sat close beside him. For a few moments there was no end of excitement, which finally came to a finish when Stacy started off for his bunk in high dudgeon.

Tad sat regarding the fat boy with twinkling eyes. Tad had something in mind. Mischief was brewing when that look appeared in his eyes. Soon after that he turned in, followed immediately by the other members of the party.

As the hours drew on, the campfire died down to a glowing heap of embers and coals, now and then starting into a sputter and a crackle as some charred piece of wood blazed up and burned briskly for a minute or two. Inside a tent one boy lay with half closed eyes gazing thoughtfully at the fire. After a time he got up cautiously and peered out. Being satisfied that all were asleep, he stole into the adjoining tent with a rope in his hand. Soon afterwards he slipped out and entered another tent, after which he went back to his own tent.

Once more the camp settled down to silence. The fire burned lower and lower until the camp was almost in darkness.

Suddenly a figure all in white appeared at the entrance to the tent occupied by Stacy Brown.

"Ware the black cat!" it said in a deep sepulchral voice. "Ware, 'ware the--"

"Wha-wha-wha-what!" gasped Stacy Brown, sitting up suddenly, gazing wide-eyed at the apparition at the tent entrance.

"Ware the black cat!"

Just then there was a flash and a report. A gun was fired. It seemed as if the flash and the report had come right out of the top of the head of the ghostly figure.

With a wild yell of terror Stacy Brown leaped from his bunk. Almost as soon as he rose, his feet were jerked violently from under him and he flattened out on the ground.

"I'm shot, I'm shot!" he yelled, starting from the door.

At about the same instant Chops, who had sprung up at the first yell of alarm, also measured his length on the ground. His feet had gone out from under him much after the same manner as had Chunky's. Chops also plunged for the door, howling with terror.

Then a strange thing occurred. Both the tent occupied by Stacy Brown and that used by the guide began performing strange antics. All at once both tents collapsed. Walter Perkins was under one of them. Walter's howls were now added to the general din.

Chunky had managed to stagger outside. So had Chops; but the tents, now down, kept bobbing as if imbued with life.

"Ghost! Ghost!" yelled Chunky.

"Yi-i-i-yah!" screamed the frightened guide. Chops's yell was cut short by another fall. At the same instant Stacy Brown again went down.

By this time the Professor had charged upon the scene. So had Ned Rector. Walter Perkins and Tad Butler were crawling out from under their collapsed tent, Walter frightened, Tad laughing.

Professor Zeppelin, grasping his revolver, was glaring about for something at which to shoot. He saw only Stacy Brown

and the guide performing strange antics. The Professor threw some dry wood on the coals, then roared out a demand to know what had happened.

"I'm shot again! I'm shot," bellowed the fat boy, making a spring for the Professor's protection. Stacy fell short by several feet, landing flat on his face on the ground. Billy Veal, who had started to run in an opposite direction, went down also.

The camp was now in a great uproar. Everybody was shouting and gesticulating. The Professor excitedly stirred the fire, then danced from one side of the camp to the other. Stacy and Chops stumbled about, falling on their faces almost as fast as they could get up.

The Professor in his excitement backed over the rope that Tad had strung about the camp earlier in the evening. He landed in a thorn bush, which, in view of the fact that he was clad only in his pajamas, did considerable execution to the Professor's skin.

Nothing like this had ever occurred to interrupt a night's rest for the Pony Rider Boys.

"Stop it!" roared the Professor, when, after extricating himself from the thorn bush, he succeeded in grasping Chunky by one shoulder.

Stacy was jerked from the grasp of the amazed Professor as if he were at one end of a huge rubber band that had sprung back. How the fat boy did yell!

Almost at the beginning of the trouble a figure had darted from the camp and plunged over the guard rope. Then, hastily scrambling to its feet, darted away into the shadows.

The fire had now blazed up so that the camp showed plainly. Chunky and the guide kept falling. The way their feet went out from under them caused the others to roar with laughter though they did not understand the cause at all.

Suddenly, Ned Rector let out a yell.

"Look! Oh, look!" he howled.

CHAPTER XVI

A MYSTERIOUS NIGHT PROWLER

Professor Zeppelin, realizing that Ned Rector had made a discovery, began peering from one to the other of the pair who were indulging in such strange antics.

"Stop that nonsense, I say!" he commanded.

"I--I can't," yelled Stacy.

"Guide, come here! I demand that you cease this foolishness."

"Nassir, yassir."

Chops was willing to stop. He was willing to obey orders, and he did so as far as possible. The guide had started to walk toward the Professor when suddenly he was jerked prone on his face.

Professor Zeppelin had observed something in the light of the campfire, however. He strode forward and threw himself upon the fallen Chops, to the great delight of the Pony Rider Boys.

"Hm-m-m! I see," observed the Professor. "A rope tied to your ankle, eh?"

"Yassir, yassir."

"Stacy, are you tied by the ankle also?" demanded the Professor.

"Yes, I'm hobbled for keeps," answered the fat boy. "I'd like to know who played this measly trick on me. Am I tied to Chops, Professor?"

"It would appear that you are. Remove the rope. Whose rope is that?"

Tad examined the line with which the two had been tied, with a grave face.

"It is your rope, Professor. Surely, you didn't do anything like this?" questioned Tad.

The boys gazed at Professor Zeppelin in well-feigned amazement.

"Oh, Professor!" groaned Ned. "Is it possible that you are getting frisky? It's this mountain air. I am beginning to feel like a yearling colt myself."

The Professor looked his disgust.

"You are mistaken, young man," he interrupted. "I know no more about it than do--"

"Than do I," finished Ned.

"That was what I was about to say, but I hardly think that would be correct. Now if you gentlemen will be good enough to see what has happened to those tents, and put them back, we may be able to get a wink or so of sleep before morning."

"Surely, you don't think I would do a trick like that, Professor?" demanded Ned indignantly.

"I am not saying. I am making no accusations, neither am I declaring any particular individual's innocence," was the stiff retort.

"Why don't you blame me, while you are about it?" grumbled Stacy. "I can stand most anything now. I've been chased out of bed by a ghost, shot at by a spook, hauled out of bed by the ankles by a band of gnomes, and--"

"Well, what else?" urged Tad.

"Thrown down by a bunch of Veal."

"Awful, awful!" groaned Ned. "Positively the most sickening pun I ever heard. Chops, did you see any spooks?"

"Nassir, yassir."

"Where?"

"Right dar, sah."

"In front of your tent?"

"Nassir, yassir."

"Now, Chops, what did this particular spook look like?" interjected the Professor.

"Look awful, sah!"

Already Tad Butler was busy replacing the overturned tents. Walter assisted in the operation.

"Say, Tad, do you know who did this thing?" he inquired.

"I could make an excellent guess," grinned Butler.

"Do you know, I believe it was either the Professor or Ned."

"Better tell the Professor what you think," suggested Tad.

"Oh, I shouldn't dare to do that," protested Walter.

"We usually say what we think in this outfit. Oh, Professor!"

"What is it, Tad?"

"Did you know we had a visitor in this camp tonight?"

"From the evidences at hand I should say we had had several of them."

"I don't mean it in that way. I am not saying that the disturbance here tonight was caused by any outside agency. Chunky is sure he saw a ghost. Maybe he did. Chops knows he saw a spook and I, too, saw something that disturbed me a little."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Professor, fixing a keen gaze on the face of Tad Butler.

"There was a strange man in this camp tonight."

"Was--was he the ghost-man?" stammered Chunky.

"He may have been, though I doubt it."

"Was he the fellow who tied one end of the rope to my ankles and the other end to Chops's ankles so that we would slide on our noses and skate on our wishbones when we tried to walk?"

"No, I think not."

"Who did it, then?"

"Why, I thought you had decided that the ghost did it?" laughed Tad.

Chunky regarded his companion solemnly.

"Tad Butler, you're a fraud," whispered the fat boy. "What I won't do to you will be good and plenty. You're the ghost. You're the one who tied me to Chops. You're the one who shot off the gun. You're the one who tore down the house that Chops built. You're the--"

"Oh, that's plenty," answered Tad with a laugh.

"Do you admit it?"

"Of course I don't."

"Do you deny it, then?" insisted the fat boy.

"In the language of the guide, 'yassir, nassir.'"

"I'm wise to you," declared Stacy, after regarding his companion searchingly.

"Look out!" warned Tad. "You are talking slang again."

"I don't care. It takes strong language to fit this case."

"Now please explain your remark of a few moments ago, Tad," requested Professor Zeppelin.

"I don't know that I can explain it," returned Tad.

"You saw something?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"What did you see?"

"As I came out I saw a man dart out of the camp. He fell over the rope just to the right of the tree there at your back. Perhaps we may be able to find his trail."

Taking a brand from the fire, Tad stepped over to the spot he had indicated and holding the torch down near the ground nodded to his companions who had pressed up close to the rope.

"The bushes certainly are broken down there," declared Ned.

"Maybe that's where the Professor tried to turn a somersault," suggested Stacy.

"What were you trying to do, Professor?" chuckled Ned.

"We will leave that for future discussion," answered Professor Zeppelin dryly. "Someone surely has been floundering about here, that is a fact."

"This is where I saw him fall," affirmed Tad.

"Tad, what sort of person was he? How did he look?" questioned the Professor.

"I was unable to see. It was too dark here."

"Maybe it was the ghost," suggested Stacy.

"Ghosts do not leave such a broad trail as this," answered Tad.

"One of them did tonight," answered the fat boy suggestively, whereat Tad Butler grinned.

"I don't like this at all," mused the Professor. "We must keep watch every night hereafter. Have you any suspicion that the mysterious visitor played the trick on us?"

"No, sir, he did not," replied Tad soberly.

The Professor eyed Tad reflectively, then asked no more questions along this line. Tad, taking a fresh brand, followed the trail away from the camp, the others of the party bringing up the rear. Tad was recognized as the best trailer among them, so the work of following this trail was left wholly to him.

They had proceeded away from the camp in a southwesterly direction for a full quarter of a mile when Tad halted. Swinging his torch from one side to the other he finally fixed upon a certain spot. Looking up at his companions he nodded.

"Here is the place," he declared enigmatically.

"What place?" questioned Chunky, crowding in.

"The place where the visitor tethered his horse. And if you will look just to the left of Ned Rector, you will discover something else."

The Pony Rider Boys uttered exclamations of amazement. There a little to Ned's left lay a battered sombrero.

"Somebody was here," breathed the Professor.

"Yes!" cried Tad. "I know who that somebody was, too," he shouted triumphantly, dropping down on his knees with face so close to the ground that Chunky wanted to know if Tad were going to eat grass.

CHAPTER XVII

PROSPECTORS IN THE HILLS

"No, I am not," answered Tad, "but I am going to tell you who our late caller was. We have seen him before."

"Who--what?" cried the Professor.

"He was one of the two men who assaulted us yesterday."

"Are you sure, Tad?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure of it," answered Butler, gazing at the ground reflectively.

"But how do you know?"

"One of the two ponies those men had, had a broken shoe on the off hind foot. The horse that was tethered here had a shoe that was broken, and the broken shoe was on the off hind foot also. As nearly as I can remember, the shoe was broken in exactly the same place that this one is. It seems to me like a pretty clear case against these fellows. What do you think, Professor?"

"Indisputable evidence, I should say. You did not observe anything familiar about the man, you say?"

"No, sir."

"Those rascals mean mischief. That is certain."

"They can't do us any harm unless they try to take a pot shot at us when we aren't looking, which I hardly think they will do," ventured Butler. "They aren't desperate enough. But I should like to know what the motive is underneath it all."

"I can't help but think that in some way they are connected with Griffin," asserted Ned.

"Yes, that may be," agreed Professor Zeppelin.

"Do you wish me to follow the trail, Professor?" asked Tad, glancing up.

"No, I think not. It would be likely to prove a fruitless chase."

"That is my opinion too."

The party now slowly retraced its way to camp. In speculating about the greater mystery they appeared to have forgotten the recent ghostly disturbances in the camp, though it was pretty generally understood that the latter incidents were due to a prank of one of the boys. That one boy, as the reader already surmises, was Tad Butler. Tad had evened his score with the fat boy for all the latter's pranks on him and the others, and Stacy knew it. The fat boy was shrewd. He said no more about his fright, but Tad observed that Stacy frequently cast reproachful glances in his direction.

Tad remained on watch for the rest of the night. They made an early start on the following morning, and, as on the previous day's journeyings, they found rough going all the way, with great rocks towering high above them, cut here and there by frequent deep, gloomy canyons.

About noon of this day as they were slowly riding through one of the rifts in the mountains, they pulled up sharply at a signal from Tad.

"What is it?" demanded the Professor, realizing that Butler had made a discovery.

Tad pointed ahead of them. The Professor gazed in the direction indicated.

"Fog?" he asked.

"I think not. It looks to me like smoke," answered the Pony Rider Boy.

"Who, Smoke Griffin?" piped Stacy in a loud voice.

"No, just plain smoke. And if you please, don't speak so loudly," admonished Tad.

"Hm-m-m. What would you suggest?" asked the Professor.

"I would suggest that we climb the side of the canyon," said Chunky with emphasis.

"On the contrary, we will go straight ahead," replied Tad with a firm compression of the lips.

"It may be our enemies who are waiting for us," suggested Rector.

"I hope it is," answered Tad.

"Yes, so do I. I rather think I shall have something to say to those gentlemen when next I have an opportunity to speak with them," added Professor Zeppelin grimly.

Tad touched his pony with the spur. The party moved on, no one speaking, each instinctively looking to his weapons, though they had little idea that they would have use for firearms. Every face wore a serious expression, every boy was wondering what they should find at the source of the smoke.

They came upon that source in a sharp bend of the canyon and brought up short. Three men who had been sitting about a campfire cooking their dinner sprang up with hands on their revolvers, but which they did not draw from the holsters. Tad and Professor Zeppelin rode slowly forward, the men standing by the fire, gazing with suspicious eyes at the visitors. All three were strangers. None of the party of Pony Rider Boys had ever seen the men before.

"Howdy!" greeted Tad, swinging a hand in greeting.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," said the Professor.

From a tent near the campfire a dog came out, barking furiously.

"Who are you?" demanded one, who acted as spokesman for the three men.

"We are a party out for a trip, for pleasure as well as health," answered the Professor.

"Known as the Pony Rider Boys," added Tad. "Might we ask who you gentlemen are?"

"My name's Jim Dunkan. That's Sam Ellison, and the other is Tom Royal. Will you get off and have a snack with us?"

"Thank you. It is a pleasure to see a friendly face once more. We will accept your invitation if you will permit us to use our own supplies. Perhaps you gentlemen have not had access to fresh supplies and need all you have," suggested the Professor.

"Well, we are a little short, that's a fact, sir. Introduce your party if you want to. If you don't, you don't have to," was the reply.

"There is no reason why I should not. I am Professor Zeppelin, in charge of the party. These young men are Thaddeus Butler, Ned Rector, Walter Perkins and Stacy Brown--"

"Otherwise known as the good thing of this outfit," added Stacy solemnly. The mountaineers laughed at the fat boy's funny face.

"Glad to meet you, fellows," greeted the men, stepping forward and shaking hands cordially all round. "Come far?"

"We are all from Missouri," answered Tad laughingly.

"Then I reckon you'll have to be shown a few things," grinned Dunkan.

"We have been," answered Stacy.

The boys by this time had dismounted and were tethering their horses while the mountaineers looked on curiously.

"You youngers 'pear mighty handy. Guess you aren't tenderfeet," observed Sam Ellison.

"Not exactly, sir," answered Butler. "We have been riding the mountains and plains for a few seasons."

"Do you gentlemen live in these parts?" asked the Professor, seating himself by the fire.

"No. We're up here prospecting."

"Ah! Gold?"

Dunkan nodded briefly.

"I discovered some indications of gold yesterday," announced the Professor.

The men were interested at once. They asked many questions which the Professor answered freely. When they learned that he was a geologist, among his other accomplishments, the men thawed instantly.

"Maybe you wouldn't mind looking at some pay dirt for us?" questioned Tom Royal.

"I should be glad to serve you in any way possible," replied the Professor cordially. "Have you struck anything yet?"

"We don't know. We may have. Of course we've found evidences, but whether it's real pay dirt or not we don't know."

"Yes, I came to the conclusion, after analyzing the rock I found, that gold could not be extracted from it in anything like paying quantities. Are there many others in here on similar quests?"

Royal said no.

"There are those here who, I reckon, have found some stuff, though," declared Duncan.

"Yes?" replied the Professor, glancing at the speaker inquiringly.

Tad caught the significance of the remark and fixed his eyes on Jim Duncan.

"Others, sir?" ventured Tad.

"Chops, you get the dinner going at once," directed Professor Zeppelin. "I think these gentlemen would like some bacon. We have an excellent blend of coffee, gentlemen. Make a large pot, guide."

"Yassir," promised Chops.

"As I was saying," continued Duncan, "there are others here who appear to have struck it rich. That is, there's one, but I don't know how many more are behind him."

"May I ask who the man is?" inquired the Professor.

"His name is Jay Stillman." The speaker frowned as he pronounced the name.

"What sort of looking man is Stillman?" asked Tad.

Duncan described the man, whereat Tad and the Professor exchanged significant looks.

"Do you know the critter?" demanded Jim suspiciously.

"We think we have seen him, sir," replied Tad. "Why?"

"I reckon you aren't friends of his?"

"Far from it," declared the Professor with emphasis. "If he is the man we think from your description, we should like an opportunity to turn him over to a sheriff."

Duncan grinned broadly.

"I reckon they're on the right side, fellows," he said, nodding to his companions. "What's he been doing to you?"

"Here is the dinner," answered the Professor. "Suppose we discuss that?"

"Right you are, pardner. Say that coffee does smell good."

"Yes, I poured the water on it," Stacy informed them.

"You can stay here and pour water on our coffee all the time, if you want to," answered Sam.

"No, thank you. I am a lion hunter, not a coffee boy."

"You get away with it in pretty good shape even if you're not a coffee boy," averred Duncan.

"Oh, there's a lot about Stacy Brown that you will learn before you have known him long," spoke up Ned.

"Yes, I'm a mine of good things," admitted Chunky as modestly as he could.

"Now about this man Stillman?" suggested the Professor.

"Yes, sir, we should like to know what his game is," said Tad.

"His game?" repeated Jim.

"Yes, sir."

"I didn't know he had any game in particular."

"He tried to drive us back. He must have had a motive else he would not have done that," declared Tad.

"Just pure meanness," answered Duncan. "He wants it all to himself. He doesn't want anybody else fooling around in the mountains here. He's taking up all the land he can get hold of, and I guess he reckons on getting a fortune out of it. Why he had a man from the city up here the other day and the fellow told a man I know that there was gold enough in these hills to buy the earth."

Professor Zeppelin glared at the speaker.

"Very interesting, indeed. Then you think he has no other motive in desiring to keep persons away from here?"

"What other motive could he have?"

"I am sure I do not know."

"I will wager that there is another motive that you gentlemen do not know anything about," spoke up Tad.

"What makes you think that?" questioned Ellison.

"Everything seems to point that way, and if he bothers us any more I shall make it my business to find out."

The prospectors laughed good-naturedly.

"You better let that job out. Jay Stillman isn't the man for boys to fool with," advised Duncan.

Professor Zeppelin bristled.

"I guess you gentlemen do not know my young men."

"I think I do," spoke up Ellison. "They've got the look of the real stuff about them. Can you shoot?"

"Well, some," admitted Tad.

"We can run, too," volunteered Stacy.

"Especially when there's a ghost after you," sneered Ned.

"Have you seen either of these men of late?" asked the Professor.

"Samsaw Stillman yesterday and told him to mosey out of this or we'd be finding out what he was doing around our diggings."

"Who is the other man who is with him?"

"I don't know," answered Duncan.

"Why, that must have been Joe Batts," suggested Ellison. "Batts is about the worst ever. I wouldn't dare turn my back to him if he had any reason for wanting to get rid of me."

"An excellent reputation, most excellent, you are giving these men," smiled the Professor.

"Is he anything like his name?" piped Chunky.

"How's that?"

"Batty--like a bat, you know," explained Stacy.

Professor Zeppelin admonished the fat boy with a stern glance, which Chunky pretended not to see.

"Do they ever bother you here in your camp or at your work?" asked Ned.

"Well, I reckon not," drawled Dunkan. "In the daytime they are afraid of our guns. In the night the dog is looking after things here."

"Where do they live?" interrupted Butler.

"Stillman has a shack near one of the Smoky Bald's gulches. He isn't there very much, I guess. I don't know where Joe lives. I guess anywhere he can find a place soft enough to lie on," answered Dunkan with a grin. "Say, you folks better make camp here with us and kind of make this a headquarters, hadn't you?"

"What do you say, boys?" questioned Professor Zeppelin.

"We might remain here until tomorrow," agreed Tad. "Mr. Dunkan wants you to make some tests for him, he says."

"All right, boys," agreed the Professor.

The lads sprang up and began opening their packs, and in a few moments their tents were being pitched, the miners watching them with interested gaze as the odd little tents went up.

"Well, doesn't that beat all?" wondered Ellison. "I never saw anything quite like that outfit before. Where'd you get them?"

"Mr. Butler invented those tents," answered the Professor proudly.

"Then Mr. Butler's all right," smiled the miner.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CAMP SUFFERS A LOSS

All the rest of the afternoon Professor Zeppelin was absorbed in examining rocks, specimens of ore, and dirt. He was deep in consultation with Dunkan and the others of the prospectors.

"Yes, there are strong indications here, but thus far I have found nothing that would pay," said the Professor. "The sample you say you got from Stillman Gulch is the best of all. It is, I might say, most promising. Is that where the other man claims to have found pay dirt?"

"Somewhere in that vicinity. We don't know the exact location."

"Are you trying to locate a vein of ore, too?" questioned the Professor.

"Sure we are. It's anybody's gold. Of course we don't follow him and spy on him. We aren't that kind of cattle. But we'll find it prospecting if we find it at all, and then you'll see music in these parts."

"I understand there are gems in these mountains."

"Yes, they've been found. Here's an amethyst I picked up a week ago."

The Professor, after examining the stone, became enthusiastic. He pronounced it an exceptionally fine specimen.

"If, sir, you are able to pick up such stones as this on this Ridge why do you waste your time in seeking for gold?"

"That's just the trick, Professor. We can't."

"But surely they must be here. This one shows evidence of having been wrenched from its original resting place and hurled some distance."

Duncan gazed at the Professor reflectively.

"By Hickey, I believe you're right at that. It gives me a new idea. I'll go to that place and hunt until either I find something or I don't."

"Do so, by all means. Those boys of mine will help you."

"Let them, but if they find anything it belongs to them. Jim Duncan hasn't got any claim on anything in these hills unless he finds it for himself. We'll be getting back now."

It was a jolly evening spent around the campfire of the prospectors. Stories were told, Chops was induced to sing a song, the boys related interesting stories of their experiences on their various journeys, then all hands turned in well satisfied with their day and their evening.

The Pony Rider Boys slept soundly. But late in the night there came an interruption--a rush of the prospectors' collie dog. The animal, tied to a tree, began to bark and strain at its leash. Just before the men turned out to see what the trouble was, the collie broke its leash and dashed away into the bushes, barking furiously. They heard the animal snarling. A yelp followed, then a chorus of explosive barks. The dog's barking ceased suddenly.

"I reckon he's chasing some animal," said Duncan.

"It didn't sound like that to me," replied Tad, still listening intently. "Of course you know the dog better than do I. Does he bark at every sound?"

"Pretty near," grinned Sam.

"Yes, he usually wakes us up once a night, sometimes more," added Tom Royal. "Reckon we might as well go back to bed."

Jim whistled for the dog. He kept whistling for several minutes, then turned back toward their tent disgustedly.

"He's got on the trail of something and gone beyond sound," he muttered. "He'll be back here in the morning."

"I hope so," muttered Tad.

"See here, you've got something in your mind, younker!" demanded Duncan.

"Nothing except that I don't believe your collie was chasing an animal. I know a dog's bark well enough to know when he's on the trail of an animal. That bark and growl wasn't like any animal-chasing growl I ever heard."

"All right, sonny, we'll see who's right," smiled Jim, turning to his tent. "Night."

"Good-night," answered Butler. "He will see whether I am right or not in the morning. I am going to find out something for myself in the morning, too. I don't believe those men are very good mountaineers, though they may be most excellent prospectors."

Tad went to sleep and slept soundly until break of day when he was up and about. Duncan's first inquiry upon getting up, was as to whether the collie had returned.

The collie had not. The broken rope with which he had been tethered before breaking away still hung from the stake.

"Well, kid, I reckon you were right about the dog's not coming back," announced Duncan, his face troubled and anxious.

"I didn't say he would not come back, did I? What I tried to tell you, was that he wasn't chasing an animal."

"Well, he was. If he hadn't been, he'd been back in this camp hours ago. He's got mixed up in his trail, but I reckon he'll be along when he gets ready. I'm not going to worry about the dog, though I'd rather lose anything I've got than to lose

him."

"You're wrong all around, Mr. Dunkan," asserted Tad confidently.

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"How d'ye know?"

"Because if you will look out yonder in the bushes you will find the trail of the man he was following," replied Tad gravely.

Tad's calm announcement startled everyone in camp. Even Chops paused with frying pan held aloft to listen to the further words of the keen-eyed Pony Rider Boy.

"What's that you say?" demanded Sam Ellison.

"Your dog chased a man away from here last night."

"How--how do you know?" stammered Jim.

"Because I saw the trail this morning."

"Where?"

"Right there. It begins with the dog's tracks, which, after a little way, are mixed up with that of the man he was after."

Dunkan eyed Tad keenly to see if the boy was joking. Tad Butler most certainly was not joking. He had never been more serious in his life.

"Show it to me," commanded Dunkan. The prospector's voice was calm, but there was a menace in it.

Without a word Tad led the way to the edge of the camp ground, where he pointed to the footprints of the dog, faintly discernible on the soft turf. Tad kept right on until he had gone some ten rods from the camp, whereupon he halted and pointed again.

"What do you make of that, Mr. Dunkan?" he asked.

"Man's tracks, as I'm alive," muttered the prospector, after a careful examination of the trail as indicated by Tad.

"Yes, and the man had been standing here for some time. If you will look a little farther you will find that he started to walk away, then broke into a run. The dog was pressing him rather too closely for comfort. At this point the dog began running faster than before. I know that because from this point the collie left only the faintest footprints, showing that he was barely touching the ground with his feet."

CHAPTER XIX

BUTLER MAKES A DISCOVERY

"Well, if that doesn't beat all!" marveled Royal.

"It certainly does," agreed Ellison.

"Yes, but that isn't finding the dog," growled Dunkan. "Boys, we've got to find that collie, and what's more, we've got to find the man he was chasing. The fellow probably took the dog with him. He must have wanted a pup mighty bad to take those chances to get one."

"Do--do they hang dog thieves down in this country?" questioned Stacy apprehensively.

"We aren't saying what we'll do," observed Duncan.

"You've got to find the dog first," nodded Stacy.

"You're right, young man. Get your guns, fellows. We'll follow this trail right smart."

"I do not think it will be of any use," Tad informed them.

"Why won't it? Don't you think we know how to run a trail?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it," answered Tad with a smile.

"Then what's the matter with you?" demanded Duncan almost savagely.

"Oh, there's nothing the matter with me. I am trying to help you, that's all."

"Shake, pard. I didn't mean to be edgewise with you. I'm mad plumb through over that dog business. You're the smartest youngster I've ever come up with and I'll take off my hat to you when I get it on again."

"Here, I'll lend you mine," offered Stacy, reaching his own sombrero toward the prospector.

"I shake my own bonnet, not the other fellow's," grinned Jim. The others laughed at the fat boy's drollery.

"Why do you say there is no need to follow the trail, Tad?" spoke up Professor Zepplin at this juncture.

"For the good reason that there is no trail to follow," was Tad's brief reply.

The party did not understand what he meant by that, and Duncan asked him to explain.

"I have run the trail out," announced Butler. "Some twenty rods from here the trail practically ends."

"How can that be?" interjected Sam.

"It is all hard rocks there for some distance and not a tree, hardly a shrub. The fellow went straight up the rocks. I know this because he trampled down a berry vine when he climbed up the rocks. That is the end of the trail. He may have gone in any direction from that point. I followed out several leads, but they came to nothing. I am sure that I should be able to pick up the trail somewhere were I to spend enough time at it. I will try it after breakfast if you want me to. Breakfast is getting cold. We'd better get back."

"Shake, pard," exclaimed Duncan, extending an impulsive hand. "You're the real thing. Nothing make-believe about you. The way you've puzzled out this trail business beats me. I'm pretty fair at it myself, but I'm not even a pussy-willow shadow to you."

"Did you hear about the three-legged rat and our black cat?" bubbled Stacy.

"No, I didn't. It isn't rats and cats, but dogs, in which we're interested at the present minute. We'll go back for some chuck. In the meantime we'll chew over it," said Duncan.

"Over the chuck?" asked Stacy.

"I reckon," grinned the prospector. "And the dog, too."

"I'm no Chinaman," objected the fat boy.

"Very strange, very strange," declared the Professor, glaring from one to another of them.

"A friend of mine lost a valuable Pomeranian in a somewhat similar manner a year ago and--"

"I ate a whole one of those once," chuckled Chunky.

"You ate a whole Pomeranian?" questioned Tad.

"Yes, yes," bubbled the fat boy. "And I had a stomach-ache for a week afterwards."

"Professor, Stacy says he ate a whole Pomeranian once," jeered Tad.

"What, what's that?" bristled the Professor.

"I did," insisted Chunky.

"What, you ate a Pomeranian dog?" cried the horrified Walter Perkins.

"A dog?" shouted Stacy.

"Yes, a Pomeranian's a dog, you boob," replied Tad, shaking with laughter.

"A dog? Oh, I thought you were talking about a cheese."

Prospectors and Pony Rider Boys joined in a roar at the expense of the fat boy. Professor Zeppelin's eyes twinkled, but his face was stern. He enjoyed the jokes of his boys fully as much as did they, and this whether the joke was at his expense or at the expense of another.

"But what do you make of this disappearance of the collie, Mr. Duncan?" asked the Professor when they were well started with the breakfast.

"I don't make anything out of it."

"Is it possible that the dog continued to follow the man?"

"Yes, it might be, but he'd caught the fellow before he got to the ledge that Butler told us about. That dog is a streak of greased electricity when he gets headed for anything."

"That's the way Chunky goes to his meals," nodded Rector.

"I notice I'm usually about ten paces behind you," retorted the fat boy.

"You men go on with your work after breakfast. I am going to fall to the trail, as the Rocky Mountain guides express it," announced Tad.

Breakfast having been finished, the work of clearing away was left to the guide. Tad asked Ned to accompany him. Ned was hardy and almost as expert on trail work as was Butler himself, though with Tad such work was more second nature than was the case with the other boy.

"Don't worry if we don't get back in time for luncheon," said Tad. "We have some biscuit in our pockets, and if we don't get back before night, why we will just camp out."

"You must return before night," ordered the Professor. "I want you here when night comes."

"We will do our best. We shall probably return before noon, but if we do not, remember that we are all right."

"If you find that dog--well, never mind," said Duncan. "I'll promise to do something handsome for both of you."

The boys with their ropes slung over their shoulders, their revolvers in the holsters, strode out of camp waving good-bye to their fellows. They were soon lost sight of.

"Fine boys," averred Ellison.

"Great," agreed Royal.

"The best ever," finished Duncan.

"What about me?" demanded Chunky.

"Well, I reckon that any fellow who can eat a Pomeranian and get off with nothing more serious than a stomach-ache is copper-lined and brass-riveted," answered Duncan.

The men soon went about their prospecting work, Professor Zeppelin accompanying Jim Duncan, Walter going out with the other two men, while Chunky remained at camp with Chops. The fat boy decided that he could have more fun

teasing the guide and sleeping between times than he could in climbing over the rocks on foot. He could ride all day, but a walk of a mile made him weary.

Tad and Ned, in the meantime, had started out on the trail of the dog and the man, which they had again picked up at the very edge of the camp. Reaching the rocks where the trail had been lost the boys sat down to take a survey of the landscape.

"I think," said Butler, after a few moments of study, "that a person climbing up this way would naturally head for that cut yonder. How far is that from here?"

"A half mile, I should say."

"Yes, that is my idea. The course to the cut would seem to be the easiest. Naturally the fellow would have taken the easiest route, because he was in a hurry to get away."

"But what became of the dog?"

"Can't you guess, Ned?"

"I might guess a good many things. But they might be a long way from the truth."

"Does this tell you anything?" asked Butler, pointing to a discolored spot on the rock near where they were seated.

"Blood!" gasped Ned.

Tad nodded.

"He hurt the dog here. It is my opinion that he hid behind this boulder and when the dog leaped up to the slippery rocks, the man struck him with a club. It was very foxy."

"Gracious, but you have eyes and some other sense that I don't seem to know much about," declared Rector admiringly.

"It is just horse sense, that's all, Ned. A fellow doesn't have to be of the steel-trap variety. All he has to do to find out things is to think a little and use his powers of observation."

"But--but, where is the dog?" begged Ned, still more perplexed now that Tad had pointed out a real clew.

"Oh, the fellow carried him off so as to get him out of sight. If the dog had been left here dead, that, he knew, would anger the men so that they would get right out on the trail. If the dog were carried away they might think the animal had got lost or fallen off a cliff, or something of the sort."

"More horse sense," answered Rector with a grin.

"Yes, that's all it is. And now if you will come with me I'll wager that I show you the dog," added Tad, scanning the landscape critically.

"All right. I shan't be surprised at anything you show me or tell me after this. I am stricken dumb with amazement and wonder. Oh, I am a thick one."

"It's well you admit it, Ned," answered Butler laughingly.

"Do you admit your failings?" snapped Rector.

"Always, when I am accused by my friends."

"Then I have nothing more to say."

Tad had scrambled to his feet. Ned followed his lead, and together they began climbing the steep side of the mountain, bearing off to the right towards a gap in the ridge, rather than climbing straight towards the top. All the time Butler was keeping a sharp lookout for trail marks, but he found nothing that would aid him in his quest. He was positive that the collie had been killed by the prowler whom he had scared away from the camp on the previous night.

"Who do you think it was, Tad?" questioned the other boy after a long, hard climb.

"If I were to guess I should say it was the same old trouble-maker, Stillman, or Batts, his assistant, or companion-in-crime, whichever you may wish to call it."

"Well, I must say those fellows are bold."

"They probably have a good deal at stake," answered Tad.

"What do you mean by that?"

"That there is crooked business of some kind going on up on this ridge. I don't suppose it is any of our affair, except possibly as it interferes with us and our rights."

"We've a large-sized bone to pick with the man anyway."

"We have," agreed Tad. "Here is a ledge that we can walk on. Keep a sharp eye down in the gulch below and look out that you don't fall. Shall I pass the rope around you?"

"No. What do you think I am, a baby? I don't get dizzy so easily as all that."

"You're not like Mrs. Snedeker--you know Mrs. Snedeker in Chillicothe?"

"Yes."

"She refused to go around the world with her husband because she said it made her dizzy and sick to travel in a circle."

Ned grunted.

"If Stacy had told that story I shouldn't have been surprised, but I am amazed at you, Tad."

"All right, we'll let it go at that. What do you see down there?"

"Nothing but air and the bottom."

"Then I have sharper eyes than you," chuckled Tad. "Back up a little. There. Now look about six feet to the left of that rock with the twin peaks. See anything?"

"Not a thing."

"Where are you looking?"

Rector pointed a finger, Tad glancing over it.

"You are looking six feet to the right of the twin peaks. I said you should look about six feet to the left of the peaks."

"Oh!"

"Now what do you see?"

"Good gracious you don't mean--"

Tad nodded triumphantly.

"It's the collie!" whispered Ned in an awed voice.

"I think so. We can't be sure until we climb down and see for sure whether it is or not."

"Well, if this doesn't beat anything I ever heard of," muttered Ned.

CHAPTER XX

A MYSTERIOUS PROCEEDING

Tad had already started back along the ledge which opened into the gulch just before they reached the gap mentioned in the preceding chapter. A short distance to the rear the rocks sloped down into the gulch with a gradual fall. It was down this rugged place that Tad began to climb, followed closely by Ned Rector.



Tad Was Followed Closely by Ned Rector.

The boys were too busy with their climb to do much talking on the way down, and had they not been thoroughly seasoned they would have been obliged to stop for breath more than once, even if the way was down hill.

"Whew! That was some climb, wasn't it?" exclaimed Rector when finally they reached the bottom.

Tad ran forward. Some ten rods up the gulch he halted, pointing to a crushed heap on the ground.

"There's the poor collie, Ned."

"The fiends! They threw him over, didn't they?"

Tad nodded, thoughtfully.

The two boys found that the dog bore a severe wound on its head, where Tad believed it had been struck with a heavy club or the butt of a gun. There was no way of determining this to a certainty. But Tad pointed out something to his companion in support of his theory which again proved that the Pony Rider Boy possessed a keen mind for reasoning out things.

"You will remember that the dog was running south when he was struck on the rock where we found the blood?"

Ned agreed with a nod.

"And that I said the man struck the dog from behind the rock on the left-hand side of the trail?"

"Yes."

"If you will examine the collie's head you will see that the wound extends from the top down the left side of the head, indicating that the person who dispatched him was also on that side. Doesn't that prove it?"

Rector gasped.

"Say, Tad, I'll run in a minute if you don't quit. You give me the creeps up and down my back. You're spooky. I'm glad Chunky isn't here. He'd have run long ago. What shall we do, leave the dog here?"

"Why, yes, I don't think it will be worth while to carry him back to camp," decided Tad.

"Then we'll give the faithful old fellow a decent burial and heap some rocks over him so the animals don't get at him. If Mr. Dunkan wants him we can tell him where to find the collie."

The boys, choosing a hollow in the ground for the burial, heaped dirt, stones and rubbish over the dead dog. Having completed this, Tad started for the long climb back.

The climb was somewhat different from the downward journey. It was grilling work going up that mountainside, and there were black and blue marks on the bodies of both boys when they reached the top. Ned's hands were skinned in spots and his temper had suffered proportionately.

"Never again!" he exclaimed with a resentful look at Tad. "I might have known better than to follow you."

"You ought to feel complimented that I asked you to accompany me."

"Ha, ha! as Chunky would say. What an excellent opinion we have of ourselves, eh?"

"You know better than that, Ned Rector. You know I'm not the least little bit conceited. I never could see any reason why a human being should feel that he was any better or any smarter than any other average person. Take my word for it, the conceited fellow gets his bumps sooner or later."

"Like Chunky, for instance?" suggested Ned.

"No, I don't mean that kind. Chunky doesn't mean half of what he says. He likes to make conversation and make fun, but he's a good fellow and smarter than most people give him credit for being."

"I know that. I'd eat my hat for the fat little rascal, but I've got to have my fun with him. Now what?"

"Maybe some more climbing. Use your eyes again. We are following a trail now."

So far as either lad could observe there was no real trail to follow. It was rock, rock everywhere they went. All the time they were getting farther and farther away from the camp.

After an hour of toil over the rocky trail they came out into a brush-covered plateau. Tad now got to work in earnest. It was but a few moments later when he announced that he had found a trail, but whether this was the particular trail for which they were in search he did not know. It was a trail and he proposed to follow it out until either it led them to something definite or came to a blind ending.

The trail proved to be more fruitful than the boys had hoped. Half to three-quarters of a mile farther on they were startled by the report of a gun.

"Someone firing a shotgun," said Tad.

"Yes, it does sound that way," answered Ned.

"We will head for it. Funny thing to be using up here. These people ordinarily use rifles. Where did you think the sound came from?"

"Over there." Ned pointed off to the right.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it were in the gulch we have just left."

"Farther to the west then."

The boys started to hunt out the man with the gun. They moved along with extreme caution now, not wishing to receive a charge of buckshot, nor were they courting discovery, for other good and sufficient reasons.

"There it goes again," exclaimed Ned.

All at once they caught sight of a man half way down the side of the gulch. A gun was standing against a tree near by, while the man was scraping the ground with a stick.

"What is he doing?" whispered Ned as the boys, crouching down, eyed him inquiringly.

"I don't know."

After a little the man, whom they now recognized as their old enemy, Jay Stillman, took up his gun, reloaded it, and then began walking about the place as if selecting a particular spot for further operations.

To the amazement of the boys Stillman thrust the muzzle of the gun down to within two feet of the ground, then fired the charge into the earth.

A second barrel was fired in a similar manner.

"For goodness' sake, what is he trying to do?" whispered Ned.

"I don't know, unless he has gone crazy," answered Tad. "Shooting charges into the ground is new business to me. I'll warrant he is up to some monkeyshine, though."

"Maybe he thinks he can hit a heathen on the other side of the world," suggested Ned.

"He's going to shoot again," Tad announced.

Two loud bangs gave evidence that Stillman had done it again. He continued these same tactics, covering quite an area of ground, his operations lasting until long after midday. All this time the two Pony Rider Boys were creeping along at a safe distance behind the mountaineer, watching his every movement. Finally, leaving his gun, he began working among the rocks. What he was doing the lads were unable to make out, and they were more puzzled over these peculiar actions than they ever had been in their lives.

Late in the afternoon Stillman shouldered his double-barrelled gun and started off toward the southwest. The boys promptly secreted themselves, because it looked as though the man were going to pass near them. He did so, though all unconscious of their presence.

"Are you going down there to see what he has been doing?" whispered Ned.

"No, I'm going to follow him. We know where that place is. It can't get away, but he can."

This being good reasoning Rector had nothing more to say. Stillman had swung off at a mountaineer's stride, a pace so rapid that he soon outdistanced the two lads, making it necessary for them to run to catch up with him. This running nearly proved their undoing. Suddenly they came in sight of the man. He was standing on a rise of ground, apparently listening, but looking off to the left. The boys dropped instantly, lying flat on the ground until they saw Stillman shoulder his gun and start on again.

"He must have heard us," whispered Tad. "We must be cautious. We know him to be a bad man and we know he is up to some crooked business. I wish I knew just what it is. Probably he's going to his shack."

"I see it!" exclaimed Ned.

"Yes, there's the roof of a building and a chimney. I reckon we're getting near our friend's roosting place. This is fine. You see what a little patience does for one. Now go carefully."

Making a wide detour the boys came up to one side of the building that they had discovered. Stillman was nowhere in sight. It was reasonable to suppose that he had entered the building.

The structure was built up of small logs, the cracks being chinked with what looked to be red mud, and a broad chimney extended some six feet above the low roof, built high to give the fire below more draft. All about the place was a dense growth of bushes, with occasional paths intersecting the plot.

"I wish we could get a look inside that place," muttered Tad.

"Not going to try it, are you?"

"No, not now. Not while he is in there. I wish he would go away."

"No such luck," complained Rector.

Almost ere the words were out of his mouth Jay Stillman stepped out from the cabin. This time he carried a rifle under his arm. He stood at the doorway of the cabin for some moments as if thinking. After a time he started down a well-beaten path that led him within a rod of where the two boys were in hiding. They scarcely breathed as he strode past them. Tad was up soon after on the mountaineer's trail. The boys did not have far to go. Stillman's horse was tethered in a glade a short distance from there. The man quickly saddled and bridled his mount; then, leaping into the saddle, he galloped away to the eastward.

Tad started on a run, to keep the man in sight as long as possible, and further to make sure that Stillman really was going away.

"He's gone. Now for his cabin!" cried Tad.

"I do hope there's no one there. Perhaps we may be able to discover something."

Turning toward the log cabin, still on a dog-trot, the boys headed towards more trouble and a most exciting experience in the cabin of the mountaineer.

CHAPTER XXI

TRAPPED IN A MOUNTAIN CABIN

As they neared the cabin they proceeded with more caution. They did not know if there were others in the building, though Tad did not believe such to be the case. At the rear of the place bushes grew close to the side of the building, so the boys chose this way of approaching the cabin.

"This is a pretty serious thing, intruding upon a man's home," whispered Tad. "But I think we are justified in doing so."

They had reached the building. Tad placed an ear against the side, but not a sound could he catch from within.

"I don't believe there is anyone at home," remarked the lad quietly. "I'm going to take a peep."

Creeping along one side of the cabin he reached a window and attempted to peer in. A sheet of brown wrapping paper had been secured over the window so as to shut off all view from the outside. But Tad, not yet at the end of his resources, decided upon a bold move. First making sure that no one was about, the lad walked boldly around to the front, nodding to his companion to follow.

Tad rapped on the door. There was no reply. He knocked harder. Under his heavy raps the door swung open a little way, Butler at the same time stepping back. He thought someone had opened the door, but quickly saw that he had done that himself.

The boy pushed the door wide open, gazed in through the opening, then stepped in. It was not an uncommon thing in the mountains for a traveler to enter another's cabin. Both boys knew that. Had they not done the same thing in the Rockies, and had not mountaineers helped themselves to the camp of the Pony Rider Boys on more than one occasion? Nothing ever had been thought of it, but somehow Tad Butler felt some misgivings about his present undertaking.

He stepped in, glancing about him inquiringly. There was little to distinguish Stillman's home from other mountain cabins they had visited. The shotgun that they had seen the man use was hanging on the wall. The dishes from

breakfast were still on the bare deal table, as was a lamp with a smoked chimney. Chunks of rock were heaped in a corner.

The fireplace was a huge affair. It was built of rough rocks, laid up almost like a staircase, extending half way across the end of the cabin. In one corner was a heap of logs sawed to length, together with a great pile of dry kindling wood. Stillman was well prepared for wet or winter weather, though there were not enough blankets in sight to protect a man in very cold weather. A bed of boughs served for a sleeping place.

Tad stooped over and pried up a loose board in the floor. He found there, in a small hole that had been excavated, another heap of rocks similar to those found in the cabin itself.

"It is my opinion that these are samples of ore," reflected the boy. "Do you know, I believe it is some shrewd game along this line that Stillman is playing."

The boys examined the place for the better part of an hour, finally sitting down to discuss what they had discovered and trying to get at the real secret of their discoveries.

All at once they realized that the day was drawing to a close. The sun had gone down some time since. Twilight fell suddenly. They also realized that they were hungry and that it was high time they were starting back to camp, which they would not now be able to reach until long after dark. Tad reasoned that they were a good three miles or more from the camp. The others surely would be worrying about them.

"They'll have a fine time finding us if they start to look for us," jeered Ned.

"Yes, I reckon they will," answered Butler with a broad grin. "They never would look for us in this place. Let's be off. First thing we know, we won't know--" Tad paused sharply, bending his head in a listening attitude.

All at once he sprang to the door, and opening it a crack peered out. He closed the door softly and bounded back, a worried look on his face.

"What is it?" whispered Ned.

"Someone is coming."

"Hurry! Run for it, then!" urged Ned.

"Too late. He is almost here."

Ned groaned.

"The fireplace," cried Tad in a low, tense voice. "Climb up! There's plenty of room. Get up as far as you can. This is a fine fix we have got into. Be quiet and have your nerve with you. Go on!"

Tad gave his companion a push towards the broad fireplace. Rector made a leap for it, and peered up into the dark chimney.

"Go on, go on!" urged Tad, giving Rector another push.

Ned disappeared up the chimney, and Tad squirmed in under the arch and was up, following his companion with the agility of a squirrel. Butler had barely drawn his feet up when he heard the door of the cabin open and close with a slam. The intruder put his gun down with a bump plainly heard by both boys. A moment later a faint light was seen below them. The newcomer had lighted the lamp.

The boys had been up the chimney but a few moments when they heard the man go to the door where, after listening briefly, he uttered a whistle. An answering whistle, sounding far away to the boys up there, came almost instantly. Then a few minutes later a second man came tramping into the cabin.

"You're late, Joe," announced a voice that the lads recognized as belonging to Jay Stillman.

"Yes, I couldn't get away from Beach."

"That's Joe Batts," muttered Tad. "A precious pair of rascals, as we shall find out if we are discovered."

"Is he going to bring the other man out soon?"

"Yes. He and Beach will be along in the morning."

"Think Beach is on the level?"

"No, of course he isn't. But he doesn't dare play foxy with us. Besides, it's money in his pocket to play square. He doesn't know where the plant is."

"What's the matter with his having a plant of his own?"

Batts laughed.

"I reckon he doesn't know enough about the game to try that," he answered with a harsh laugh.

"He'd better not," growled Stillman.

"Got everything fixed?"

"Yes. I planted a new patch of yellow daisies this afternoon," answered Jay, whereat a series of chuckles drifted up the chimney, causing Tad to wonder what the men meant by "yellow daisies." There seemed no explanation of the term.

"I'm going to sneeze," whispered Rector.

"Don't you dare," commanded Tad in alarm.

"I've breathed in enough soot to clog a smoke stack."

"Hold your nose."

"Seen anything of that Pony Rider outfit?" asked Stillman.

"They've connected with Dunkan's crowd," replied Joe Batts.

"They have? I tell you we made a mistake in letting them get in so close. They've got to be driven out. We have too much at stake. First, here is the claim we salted down today, then there is the other thing. Between the two we are in to make a big fortune. I'm to meet Bates the day after tomorrow and get our pay for the work we are doing up at the other place."

"About that Pony crowd, and the other bunch. We've got to get rid of them and right smart. They are too nosey," declared Batts.

"What are we going to do, shoot them down and get strung up for it? Not for mine. We'll put them out of business in some other way. I would have done it last night, but--"

"But what?" questioned Batts.

"I opened the way. I got that critter all right."

"The dog?"

"Yes."

"They'll raise a row about that," warned Batts.

"No they won't. They'll think he fell over. Oh, I looked after that all right. There's only one thing to be done, get our money for the claim we salted, and the wad for the other work we are doing, and clear out."

"What about Hans?"

"I ain't bothering about him. Let him fight his own battles. We have played this game for several months now and have a tidy sum put away where it will be safe. First thing we know the government will get wise, and then it will be all up with us for the next twenty years if not worse."

"Got anything for Hans tonight?" questioned Batts.

"Yes. I'm going to take it over to him later. He doesn't have to send it out until midnight. Tomorrow night Smoky Griffin won't be in until one o'clock with the stuff. It's coming in another way, but the critters won't get wise to it, even if they have doped out the other system, which there's evidence that they are on track of. Those Pony Boys have got to be run out of these mountains before we do anything else, and they've got to go right away."

"That's easy," declared Batts confidently.

Stillman shoved back his chair, and, gathering a bundle of dry wood, placed it in the fireplace, first having stuffed an old newspaper in. Tad groaned inwardly. He knew what was coming. Stillman touched a match to the heap in the fireplace. A faint crackling sound was borne to the ears of the two Pony Rider Boys, and a wave of heat rolled up to them.

"Oh, help! This settles it!" moaned Ned Rector.

Then came a cloud of white, suffocating smoke. Ned let go a terrific sneeze. The sneeze jolted him loose, his feet slipped from the ledge, and he went sliding down on top of his companion, uttering a yell as he felt Tad giving way beneath him.

CHAPTER XXII

PONY RIDER BOYS IN THE STEW

Jay Stillman, after starting the fire, had suspended a kettle from a crane, having first half filled the kettle with a stew that he proposed to warm over for their evening meal. Fortunately for the two lads who were sliding down the chimney the stew had not yet become hot enough to do any damage to a boy's skin. On the other hand, the smoke in a dense, suffocating cloud was pouring up the chimney.

As the yell in the chimney reached the ears of the two men sitting by the table they gazed at each other in amazement. Quick-witted as they were, the true significance did not occur to them. Pieces of stone, soot, the accumulation of years, were dropping into the fire. Then came a solid body.

Tad Butler hit the fire first. He smashed into it, carrying kettle and crane down with him. Fire, burning brands and sparks belched out into the room as though an explosion had occurred in the big fireplace.

Tad with quick instinct was struggling to get out of the way of his falling companion, when Ned Rector landed on him full force. Tad humped himself, and Ned went sprawling out on the hearth.

Butler did not lose his presence of mind for a second. In fact Tad had formed his plans, so far as it was possible to form them, before he reached the fire.

Uttering a yell, calculated to strike terror to one who heard it, Tad rolled out on the hearth, his clothes ablaze and his hair almost singed off. The mountaineers still sat in their chairs, lower jaws hanging, eyes bulging.

Without waiting for the men to recover from their surprise, Tad gave a couple of quick rolls. The rolls served to put out some of the fire in his clothes as well as to bring him nearer to the object towards which he was rolling.

The boy's feet came up with great force, and the deal table standing between the two mountaineers rose up into the air, dishes, lamp and all.

Ned uttered a howl, a series of howls. Blood-curdling howls they were, too. He had caught Tad's purpose and was aiding it with all his might.

The lamp, dishes and all went over with a crash. The two men in trying to get out of the way of the flying dishes and lamp both toppled over backward, landing on their backs on the floor. Of course the lamp exploded with a dull "pouff!"

"The door!" Tad commanded sharply. "Run low!"

Ned scrambled to all fours and made for the door dog-fashion. By this time Stillman and Batts had sprung to their feet and drawn their revolvers.

"Shoot! Shoot!" yelled Jay.

"My gun's stuck," howled Batts.

"Bang, bang, bang!"

Three shots were fired in quick succession from the pistol of Jay Stillman. Two of them bored holes in the door casing just above Ned Rector's head. The third shot went out through the open door.

Tad was still in the room, but crawling toward the door with all speed. The light from the burning oil now flared up, revealing his presence. Stillman let go two quick shots at the boy. One bullet grazed Tad's head. He remembered afterward that it felt hot, like the heat in the fireplace when he fell into the stew.

Batts at this juncture jerked his weapon from its holster, but the pistol slipped from his hand and fell to the floor.

"Oh, you fool!" roared Stillman.

Tad plunged out through the open door, landing on his face in the dirt.

"Jump to one side!" he commanded sharply.

Ned, taking the hint, gave a leap to the right, and just in time, for he was standing directly in front of the open door, through which two revolver bullets were fired almost at the instant of his leap. Tad had crawled to the left.

"Run!" he called.

Ned did run until Butler called a halt a few rods from the cabin. Tad grasped the arm of his companion the instant he reached him, then led the boy back toward the cabin.

"Where, where you going?" gasped Tad.

"To see what is going on back there. Are you hurt?"

"I'm near dead," groaned Rector. "I haven't any skin left except what is hanging in shreds. Oh, what an awful experience. I'll bet you are a sight, too."

The boys were creeping nearer the cabin. They found the two men inside stamping out the fire on which they had thrown blankets from the bunks.

Stillman dashed out of doors as soon as he had extinguished the fire. In his hand was his rifle. In the meantime Batts had procured another lamp and shortly afterwards had lighted and placed it on the table.

Stillman remained outside, crouching by the doorway listening, with rifle ready to take a shot at the slightest sound. At that moment Tad Butler and Ned Rector were lying less than ten feet from the crouching figure of the mountaineer. They dared hardly breathe.

"What do you make of it, Jay?" asked the other man, thrusting his head out close to the watching mountaineer.

"Funny business."

"Where are they?"

"I wish I knew. I'd kill them on sight."

"You--you don't think it was one of the outfit down in the gulch, do you?" asked Batts.

"I reckon not. Still, it might have been. We'll get supper and I'll go down there and find out," decided Stillman with emphasis. "If I see any signs of a fellow who has been in a fire I'll plug him sure as my name's Stillman," raged the mountaineer.

"Look out, Joe!" warned Batts. "They may still be touchy about the pup and have a weather eye open."

"They won't catch me, now that I'm on my guard."

Stillman entered the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"Somebody ought to keep watch," suggested Batts.

"You go out. I'll fix up the wreck. No; take your own gun. I want mine where I can get hold of it. I overshot, too. Did you get wise to the foxiness of those fellows? Run out on all fours so we'd shoot over them. Foxy, foxy! That wasn't no tenderfoot trick."

Batts picked up his rifle and started for the door.

"Skip!" whispered Tad. "Run for it, but don't make a sound unless you want to stop a bullet."

Ned Rector needed no urging. By the time Batts had reached the threshold of the door the boys were well down the path. Even then the keen-eared mountaineer heard them, and sent a bullet in their direction, but the bullet sailed far above the heads of the boys. Tad changed his course somewhat, as the fellow had their range a little too closely to suit young Butler.

"I guess that's all," decided Ned.

"Don't be too sure of it. They may be following us, so we must be cautious."

"What do you mean?" demanded Ned.

"I mean that I am going to follow those fellows. There surely is something big on foot. I think I know what it is, and if I am right we shall have done the biggest piece of work of our lives."

Ned Rector groaned.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MYSTERY OF SMOKY BALD

An hour passed before the boys discovered any sign of life about the cabin. The hoot of an owl somewhere off to their right brought Stillman to the door of the cabin. Two quick hoots from Stillman elicited an answering one from the brush. Then a man stepped into the clearing.

"Smoky Griffin," breathed Tad. "I was certain that he was in this deal, whatever it may be. There! See! He is giving Stillman something. Those fellows surely are bold. How do they know but we are still hanging around here?"

Tad crept away and was soon pressing his ear close to the window over which the brown paper was stretched. While he could hear the voices of the three men in there, he was unable to make out a word of what they were saying. Half an hour later Smoky left the cabin. He was shortly followed by Joe Batts and Stillman, who plainly were trailing Smoky.

Something was doing in a very few minutes. Stillman and Batts had emerged from the cabin so cautiously that none but sharp eyes could have detected their exit. The men separated and cautiously worked their way around the cabin, all the time enlarging their circle of observation, until they had penetrated far into the shrubbery. Apparently having satisfied themselves that there were no prowlers about, they joined and started off to the northward, plainly following a well-established trail.

"They are off. Come on," whispered Tad with a trace of excitement in his voice.

The mountaineers strode rapidly along, apparently without thought that they might be followed. Nevertheless Tad used every caution, though he was obliged to travel rapidly to keep up with the men.

"Look there!" whispered Tad, crouching low.

The mountaineers had suddenly halted. In the near distance Butler discovered, faintly outlined, a cabin. Just then one of the men placed his hands to his lips and uttered a long-drawn cry that sounded like the call of a night bird. A light flashed up. It seemed to be high up near the tops of the trees. The light was more like an electric flash than that from an ordinary lamp.

"Hark! Hear that!" exclaimed Ned.

"A gasoline motor. This is strange," muttered Butler.

Stillman and Batts strode to the cabin and after a few moments were admitted. Tad and Ned crept up closer. They dared not go all the way to the mountain cabin until after they had assured themselves that there were no traps for them to fall into. It had seemed a little too easy for Tad thus far.

"Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, after having stretched out his hand to feel his way ahead.

"What is it?" demanded Rector.

"A wire, and it's charged. Not very heavy, but it stung me. Ned, I'll wager that this wire extends all the way around this cabin. You see it is only about a foot from the ground so that a person not knowing it was here would trip over it and probably give the alarm to the occupants of the cabin. This begins to look interesting."

"Oh, Tad, look!"

"Sh-h-h-h! Not so loud, Ned. You surely will get us into trouble."

"But look up there near the tree tops. What is it? More signals?"

"Yes, but not what you think," whispered Tad.

A faint crackling sound was borne to their ears, little crinkly darts of electricity shooting out from a point up there in the air.

"I--I don't understand it," whispered Ned.

"Wireless, Ned," answered Tad. "I looked to find something of the sort. Someone is sending."

At intervals the rhythmic squeal of the wireless would set in, then suddenly cease. Finally the message was sent, so Tad interpreted the sounds and flashes. The sending lasted all of ten minutes, then the power was shut off and silence settled over the cabin.

"Are you going to try to get into the cabin?" questioned Ned a little apprehensively.

"Not tonight. I have other plans in view. I am waiting for--there they come." Stillman and Batts crept from the cabin and stood silently for several minutes. Tad heard Stillman say, "All right," whereupon the two men set off toward their own cabin, with Tad Butler and Ned Rector following at a safe distance to the rear.

At last they saw the men enter their own cabin, after which Tad decided that it was time to go home to his own camp. Part of the return journey was taken at a trot, a regular Indian lope, which was reduced to a cautious feeling of their way as they neared the Pony Rider Boys' camp. A bright campfire was burning there and, as they reached the edge of the camp, Tad saw that the entire outfit was up, though it was then two o'clock in the morning. There was a shout when Tad and Ned stepped into the circle of light.

The two boys were not pleasant-looking objects. Their faces were blackened and their hair badly singed, while their clothing was half burned from their bodies.

Jim Dunkan and his companions saw that the boys had been through a tough experience, but they waited in patience until Tad should be ready to explain what had occurred. Walter and Chunky were shooting questions at Tad and Ned at a more rapid rate than any one person could reply to.

"First put a guard out, then give us something to eat. We are liable to be spied upon and it is very important that nothing of what I am about to say be overheard by any outsider. Who will take the watch?"

Tom Royal volunteered to do so, though it was evident that he much preferred to remain in camp and listen to what Tad

had to tell them.

"I--I got the biscuit thief!" cried Chunky. "Nassir. Yassir. There he sits. Chops is the biscuit destroyer. I caught him red handed."

"By the Way, Mr. Duncan, Stillman is the man who killed your dog," said Tad. "We found the poor collie and gave him a decent burial."

Duncan's face hardened and one hand dropped to the holster at his side.

"I think we shall even things up with him, so please don't take the law into your own hands," urged Tad. "I think you will be willing to let the law take its course after you have heard what I have to say. Is there a government officer anywhere within reach?"

"Jim Coville, the forest ranger, is the only man I know of," answered Sam Ellison.

"Where may he be reached?"

"It's a twenty-mile ride to his station."

"I must find him at once. Will you go with me and show me the way? After I get something to eat I will tell you what has occurred."

Duncan said he would.

While Tad and Ned were eating their belated supper the others sat about--all but Chunky, who decided that he too needed food--and waited with some impatience until Tad was ready to tell them his story.

This he did very shortly afterwards, sketching it briefly up to the time of Smoky Griffin's appearance on the scene.

"You beat anything I ever heard of," growled Sam Ellison.

"What do you make of it, sir?" asked Tad.

"Make of it? Why, Tad, you've turned up one of the biggest sensations this mountain has ever known. Those fellows that you saw shooting into the ground today--or the one you saw doing it--was salting the ground with gold so that when the man they were going to swindle had the soil analyzed it would be found to contain 'pay dirt' in profitable quantities. I wonder who the victim was to be?"

"I heard them mention a man named Beach," said Butler.

Duncan laughed loudly.

"So! He is in it, too, eh? Beach is a crooked real estate man from down Asheville way. A wireless outfit on Smoky Bald, eh? Well, if that doesn't beat all. Kid, what do you think that wireless outfit way up here means?"

"I have been thinking about it backward and forward," answered Tad seriously. "I have thought that perhaps the sending that we heard was to some persons belonging to the gang. It may be that the folks at the other end are making a deal to send someone in here to be swindled. I may be on the wrong trail entirely, but that's the way I reason the mystery out."

"Boy, I reckon you've doped this thing about right," nodded Duncan.

"Is it possible?" bristled the Professor. "Then we must do something."

"Yes. We must get an officer. He will know what to do, sir," replied Butler. "I first thought we might bag the outfit ourselves, for they surely are here for no lawful purpose. After thinking the thing over I don't believe it would do at all."

"Jim Coville is the man we want. He is a forest ranger, and has authority over things besides trees. We will go get him when you are ready, Butler."

"I am ready now, Mr. Duncan. We shall be back some time tomorrow, Professor. I think the boys had better stay in

camp. Please, also, be careful how you boys speak of this matter, as there may be eavesdroppers, and no suspicion of the truth must reach the ears of the enemy."

It was a few moments later when Tad Butler and Jim Duncan swung to their saddles and started off for their long ride to the station of the forest ranger.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

Day was dawning when the two, after a trying journey, reached the cabin of the ranger. Tad uttered a long drawn "Hoo-o-o-o-e-e-e," which brought Jim Coville to the door of his cabin. He recognized Duncan at once, and invited the two in. Jim had another guest, a man who was introduced as Rodman, and whom Tad Butler decided was a very keen, resourceful man.

The callers, when they said they had something of importance that they wished to say to Coville in private, were informed that they might speak freely before Rodman. Tad then told his story, watching and noting its effect on Rodman. He saw that worthy start when he mentioned the sparking up near the tree tops.

"Young man," cried Rodman after Tad had finished, "you have done a big thing, and for which you have earned and will receive the thanks of the United States Government. I am Dave Rodman, United States Secret Service, and I am here to find a supposed, or rather suspected, gang of swindlers in these mountains. I have covered the Ridge and I have found nothing. Your eyes and your scent were keener than mine. What is your plan?"

"That we go there in force tonight."

"I'll have to send for help. That will take nearly two days."

"I reckon you will have all the help you need," spoke up Jim Duncan. "There are four in my party and there's five of the Pony Rider outfit. I'll stake that crowd against any twenty men in these mountains. You turn these boys loose on their own hook and they'll bring back every one of these traitors, dead or alive--probably alive."

"I am inclined to agree with you," replied the Secret Service man after a brief consideration of the subject, during which he regarded Tad Butler shrewdly. "If the others are from the same piece that you are, young man, I don't need any other assistance. I will go with you now."

"No, that will not be wise," objected Tad. "You must not be seen in our company or you will frighten away the men you are after. If I may offer a suggestion, keep under cover right here until after dark, then take the trail for our camp. I will start out early in the evening and get on the trail of the gang, meeting you at a certain agreed-upon point, where you will go with my party. I shall then know what to tell you about the situation."

"All right. I'll be there at nine o'clock. Thank you," he added, rising and giving Tad's hand a quick, firm pressure.

Coville made his visitors sit down and have breakfast with him before they started out on their return journey. They left him about nine o'clock that morning. Reaching their camp, Tad, saying that he was too sleepy to talk, turned in for a long sleep, from which he awakened about four o'clock in the afternoon. He then detailed to his companions what his plans were, and named an hour and place where he would meet them that evening, then, shouldering his rifle, the boy sauntered from the camp as if he were out to hunt game for his outfit, and was seen no more that day.

It was eleven o'clock at night when the mournful hoot of an owl in a gulch about half a mile from Stillman's cabin brought an answering hoot, after a proper interval. A few moments later the party of Pony Riders and prospectors, headed by Dave Rodman, were startled to see Tad Butler standing before them. Though they knew he was to meet them at that point, he had slipped in among them so cleverly that it seemed as if he had suddenly grown out of the ground.

"You're a wonder," complimented Rodman. "What is the news?"

"Your men are at the wireless station right now, and some hours before they were supposed to be there. There are five

of them. Beach is with them. It is to be their last meeting at the cabin, for they seem to have discovered that they are being looked for, and propose to make a getaway to-night."

"Who are the other three?" demanded Rodman sharply.

"Besides Beach, there are Smoke Griffin and the wireless man, whose name is Hans Gruber, and one other. I think we had better be going or we may be too late," suggested Tad.

Dave Rodman uttered an exclamation under his breath.

"I reckon you're right," agreed the Secret Service man. "For your information I will tell you that I have heard of Gruber before. He was under suspicion of being a German spy during the war, and was one of three men who blew up a munition factory in a certain place. The others were caught, but Gruber got away. Uncle Sam is still looking for him. Shall we move?"

"Yes," answered Tad. "I suggest that we go cautiously and keep quiet. All ready."

In due time Tad halted at the point where he and Ned had first discovered the cabin. He directed his companions to wait there while he did a little investigating. Rodman was willing to leave the arrangements to Butler, realizing that the lad was keen, and that, knowing the ground, he would be likely to avoid pitfalls. Tad returned half an hour later.

"The men are all in the cabin," he said. "They aren't working the wireless tonight, but they are working their jaws, at times having quite a heated discussion over the division of the funds. They expect a victim to come up here tomorrow with one of their fellows, to buy that salted-down gold mine, but they aren't going to wait for him. There is a light in the cabin. You can't see it from here because they have hung a blanket over the window."

"Do you know if the wireless plant is in the cabin?" questioned Rodman.

"No, sir, it is under the cabin," answered Tad promptly. "The aerials are now down and all traces of the plant above ground have been removed."

"Huh! Anything else?"

"There is a burglar alarm wire surrounding the cabin. I'll tell you when you get to it. Be careful that you do not stumble over it."

Rodman was amazed.

"Wait a moment," he said. "If you have a plan I should like to hear it before we proceed. Perhaps I may not approve of it."

"Yes, sir, I was about to suggest it. There is only one door in the cabin, and that is on this side. There is one window at the rear. Two men should get within easy range of that window, so they can plainly see any person who attempts to go out through it. The rest of the party should line up in front with rifles at ready, a little ahead of the others."

"And what will you be doing?" demanded the government officer.

"Oh, I am going in to demand their surrender."

"Quiet now. Every man on the alert," ordered Rodman. "Take positions."

Ned and Ellison were assigned to guard the window exits, while the others were placed in open order in a curving line about the front of the cabin. "Ready, Butler?"

For answer Tad stepped forward cautiously, halting when close to the cabin, to look back at his support. He nodded, and walking up to the door, placed an ear against it. All eyes out there were upon the slender figure of the Pony Rider Boy faintly outlined against the cabin. Finally Tad waved a hand to indicate that he was ready. He tried the door and found that it was not locked.

Slipping his revolver from its holster Tad gently pushed the door open, so gently in fact that those within evidently thought a mountain breeze was responsible. Butler was at one side of the door now, and was unseen by those in the cabin. His purpose was to give Dave Rodman a good view of the interior.

"Great guns but that boy is a cool one!" muttered Tom Royal.

Stillman sprang up and strode towards the door. His hand was upon it when all at once the muzzle of a revolver was pushed firmly against his stomach. The others in the cabin did not see what had occurred, but it was plain that they understood something was wrong.

"Put out the light!" yelled Stillman, springing back.

"You are surrounded. Give in before all of you are shot!" retorted Butler. He fired a shot into the floor of the cabin, and almost at the same instant a volley of revolver shots answered his own, but Tad, crouching low, was unhit. He then fired a little higher, hoping to catch a leg. He did. The leg belonged to Stillman, as Tad knew by the yell that followed.

"Do you surrender?" called Butler, dodging to one side again. The answer was a volley of shots from the inside.

"Give them a low volley. Look out, you fellows behind the cabin," ordered Tad. The volley came at about the instant that Tad threw himself on the ground. During the remaining few minutes the men in the cabin fired rapidly at the flashes of the rifles out there, but with poor results. Stacy Brown got a bullet through an arm--that is, it grazed the skin--because he decided that he could shoot better standing up. Chunky yelled that he was "shotted," but no one paid any attention to him.

Professor Zeppelin was blazing away, while Ned and Royal lay flat on their stomachs back of the cabin, narrowly watching the window. Their patience was rewarded a few minutes later when the window, sash and all, burst out and a human being tumbled out. He scrambled to his feet.

"Halt. Drop your gun!" commanded Royal.

Instead the fellow ran. Royal brought him down with a bullet in the leg.

"Don't move. You are a dead man if you get up!" warned Ned. "If the bullets from the officers don't get you, one of ours will. I know you. You're Smoky Griffin and we've got you dead to rights this time, you miserable scoundrel. You won't do any more bluffing on this range for a long time to come, I reckon."

"Why not set fire to the cabin and smoke them out?" cried Walter Perkins.

"No, no, no," returned the Professor. "We must not destroy the evidence. Tad knows what to do and he is doing it bravely, like the man he is."

"Cease firing!" shouted Tad Butler. "They are asking for quarter."

"What do you wish us to do?" demanded Joe Batts.

"Lay down your arms and come out one by one. Don't try to go out by the rear window. I reckon one of your cayuses who tried it is lying on his back out there now."

"Come and get us!" howled a voice from within the cabin.

"All right, we'll come and get you, but first we'll give you some volleys to put you in a more humble frame of mind. Low ball!" answered Rodman.

Once more Tad, who had risen, threw himself down, and the rifles of his party banged away at the cabin, the front of which was by this time thoroughly perforated with bullet holes.

"We give in. Stop shooting!" called someone in the cabin.

"Cease firing!" commanded Rodman. "Stillman out first. Leave your guns in the cabin!"

Stillman dragged himself slowly out. One leg would not bear his weight.

"Over there," directed Tad, waving a hand toward his companions. "Mr. Duncan, here is the man who killed your dog. Hans, come out here. Be quick about it!"

A bespectacled, thin, studious-appearing man staggered out and collapsed on the ground.

"Batts and Beach now!"

The two crawled out on all fours. Both had been wounded in the legs.

"Smoky Griffin."

"He went out through the window," groaned Batts.

"Ned, have you got Smoky?"

"You bet."

"That's all, then. No one else in there, is there, Batts?"

"Go find out if you want to know," growled the mountaineer.

"All right, I will." Tad swept the interior of the cabin with a flash light that he had brought along, and found that all of the men were out. "Gather them in, Mr. Rodman. All clear within."

With a yell the Pony Rider Boys and the prospectors sprang forward and a few moments later the prisoners, whose wounds Professor Zeppelin had dressed, were securely bound. Smoky was attended to by Ned Rector.

An examination was then made of the cabin. In the cellar were found a gasoline engine with which the dynamo was operated, and a powerful wireless outfit. Papers which proved to be of great value to the government agent also were found in a secret compartment under the cellar floor. At the direction of the Secret Service man, for reasons known to himself, the plant was left as it was for the time being.

Early the following morning the prisoners were loaded on ponies, and the long journey to the railroad station was begun.

On the way to the station, Beach, a cowardly fellow, was induced to make a confession, through which the government agents were enabled to telegraph on for the arrest of the men higher up in the nefarious scheme, which might have made millions for its originators.

This crime syndicate had its agents in many cities, where victims were selected and sent to the mountains to be fleeced. Ahead of them went the wireless messages giving full details and directions to the men that the Pony Rider Boys had discovered on the Ridge. Most of the principals in the scheme were arrested, though the leading figure, if there was one, was never captured nor even identified.

Following the clearing up of the mystery of the mountains, the Pony Rider Boys resumed their adventuring until the time came for them to head their ponies northward. The Riders were going home, going regretfully, too, with a year of hard work before them, but to be heard from again in a series of delightful as well as exciting experiences. The story of these will be related in a following volume entitled, "THE PONYRIDER BOYS IN NEW ENGLAND; Or, An Exciting Quest in the Maine Wilderness."

THE END