

The High School Boys in Summer Camp eBook

The High School Boys in Summer Camp by H. Irving Hancock

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THE MAN IN THE FOUR-QUART HAT

"You'll find your man in the lobby of the Eagle Hotel or in the neighborhood of the hotel on Main Street," said Dick Prescott. "You can hardly miss him."

"But how will I know Mr. Hibbert, when I see him?" pursued the stranger.

"I don't know that his name is Hibbert," Dick answered. "However, he is the only young man who has just reached town fresh from Europe. His trunks are pasted all over with labels."

"You'll know the young man, sir," Tom Reade broke in, with a quiet smile. "He always wears a spite-fence collar. You could bill a minstrel show on that collar."

"A collar is but a slight means of identification, in a city full of people," remarked the stranger good-humoredly.

"Well, then, sir, your man also wears a four-quart silk hat, and a long black coat that makes you think of a neat umbrella covering," Tom went on.

"And lavender trousers," supplemented Greg Holmes.

"Always wears these things, you say?" questioned the stranger.

"He has, so far," Dick nodded. "Mr. Hibbert has been in town only since late yesterday afternoon, and it's only four in the afternoon to-day."

"I shall be able to find my man all right," smiled the stranger. "You've informed me that he is stopping at the Eagle Hotel. Until now, I knew only that Mr. Hibbert was in Gridley. Thank you, young gentlemen."

"Now, I wonder how he knew that," murmured Tom reflectively.

"Knew what?" demanded Dave Darrin.

"That we're gentlemen," Tom responded.

"Oh, he guessed that," suggested Harry Hazelton.

"He's a good guesser, then," remarked Tom. "I always like to see a man so discerning. I'm ashamed to confess it, but Dick is the only fellow in our crowd who looks at all like a gentleman. He is dressed in his Sunday best. Look at us!"

The other five certainly looked neat enough, even though they did not wear their "Sunday best."

“Now, fellows, what’s the lowest I’m to take for the canoe?” Dick inquired, after a glance at his watch. “The train is due in two minutes.”

Instantly his five chums looked thoughtful.

“You’ll get the most that you can, of course,” Greg insisted.

“I shall try to get a good price,” Dick nodded, “but I may find myself up against close bargainers. So hurry up and vote as to the lowest price that I’m to accept under any circumstances.”

“What do you say?” asked Tom Reade, looking at Dave.

“We ought to get sixty dollars for it, at the very lowest,” Darrin replied, slowly. “I’d like to pull in seventy-five dollars, for we need every penny of the latter amount.”

“We might get along with seventy,” hinted Harry Hazelton. “Suppose we say seventy dollars as the lowest possible price that we can consider.”

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"Sixty-five dollars, anyway," urged Dan Dalzell, otherwise known as "Danny Grin."

"What's your own idea, Dick?" asked Tom Reade, as the distant whistle sounded.

"If you fellows are going to be content with a sixty or seventy-dollar bottom price," suggested Prescott, "I wish you'd elect someone else to go in my place."

"Do you think we'll have to take fifty?" asked Tom Reade looking aghast.

"If you send me, and leave the trade in my hands," retorted young Prescott, "then you'll have to accept ninety dollars as the very bottom price, or there won't be any sale."

"Hurrah!" chuckled Danny Grin. "That's the talk! Ninety—or nothing!"

"Do you think you can get that much?" asked Dave doubtfully.

"I'll have to, or I won't make any trade," Dick smiled, though there was a glint of firmness in his eyes.

"Let it be ninety dollars or nothing, then," agreed Tom Reade, adding, under his breath, "With the accept on the 'nothing.'"

As Dick glanced about him at the faces of his chums they all nodded their approval.

"I have my final instructions, then," Dick announced, as the east-bound train rolled in at the Gridley station. It had been from the westbound train, a few minutes before, that the stranger seeking Mr. Hibbert had alighted.

"Wish you luck, old chap!" cheered Dave, as Dick ascended the carsteps.

"I wish us all luck," Dick called back from the car platform, "and I'll try to bring it back to you."

The train was moving as Dick entered one of the day coaches. Silently his chums wished that they might all have gone with Dick, instead of turning away from the station, as they were now doing. Funds were low with Dick & Co., however, and all hands had contributed to buy young Prescott's round-trip ticket to Porthampton, more than an hour's ride away.

"Do you believe Dick can get ninety dollars for the canoe?" asked Dave at last, when the high school boys were half way to Main Street.

"Why not? It's a six-paddle war canoe, a genuine one, and in good condition for the water," Tom Reade replied.

"But it's only a second-hand canoe," Darrin argued. "It was second-hand when we bought it at the Wild West auction a year ago."

"That canoe is in just as good order as it ever was," Greg maintained. "It's a shame for us to sell it at all. We could have had a lot of fun with it this summer."

"Yes," sighed Danny Grin, "if only Harry and I hadn't been forbidden by our parents to have anything more to do with the canoe."

"One thing is certain," spoke up Tom promptly. "With two of our fellows barred from entering the canoe we couldn't have any fun. Dick & Co. have always pulled together, you know. There are six of us, but we don't break up into smaller parties, and we don't recruit our ranks with newcomers."

"I don't see why my father had to kick so about the canoe," sighed Harry Hazelton. "We enjoyed the good old canoe all last summer, and not one of us got hurt in it, or from it."

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"I understand why your father objects, Harry," broke in Darrin. "With five drowning accidents from canoes hereabouts, already this summer, and two of those accidents on our own river, your father has some right to be nervous about the canoe."

"I can swim," argued Harry.

"So could both of the fellows who were drowned right here in the river," rejoined Reade. "Harry, I don't blame either your father or Dan's mother for objecting. Anyway, think of the fun we're going to have, this summer, of a different kind."

"If we sell the canoe," Darrin laughed. "But we haven't sold it yet."

"Oh, Dick can get something for the canoe," insisted Reade.

"Yes; but 'something' won't fill the bill, now, for you all heard Dick say he wouldn't take less than ninety dollars for it. When Dick says a thing like that he means it. He will bring back ninety dollars, or-----"

"Or nothing," finished Dave. "Somehow, I can't just figure out what any man would look like who'd give ninety dollars for an old second-hand war canoe, even if it is of Indian model."

"And made of genuine birch bark, which is so hard to get these days," added Reade. "Fellows, I can't believe that our old Dick will come back whipped. Defeat isn't a habit of his, you know."

So the "Co." of Dick & Co. wandered up on to Main Street, a prey to suspense. Some hours must pass ere they could hope to know the result of their young leader's mission at Porthampton.

All the member of Dick & Co. are assuredly familiar enough our readers. These six young Americans, Gridleyites, amateur athletes and high school boys, were first introduced to the reader during their eventful days of early chumship at the Central Grammar School. Their adventures have been related in detail in the "*Grammar School Boys Series*." How they made their start in athletics, as grammar school boys, and, more important still, how they made their beginnings in character forming, have all been related in that series. We next came upon Dick & Co. in the "*High School Boys Series*." All of our readers recall the rousing story of "*The High School Freshmen*." Young Prescott and his chums were bound to be "different," even as freshmen; so, without being in the least "fresh," they managed to make their influence felt in Gridley High School during their first year there. Though, as freshmen, they were not allowed to take part in athletics, they contrived to "boost up" Gridley High School athletics several notches, and aided in putting the Athletic Association on a firmer basis than it had ever known before. They did several other noteworthy things in their freshman year, all of

which are now wholly familiar to our readers. Their doings in the second high school year are fully chronicled in "*The High School Pitcher*." In this second volume the formal and exciting entry of Dick & Co. into high school athletics is splendidly described, with a wealth of rousing adventure and humorous situations.

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This present series, which is intended to describe the vacations of our Gridley High School boys in between their regular school years, opened with the preceding volume, *"The High School Boys Canoe Club."* Within the pages of that volume are set forth the manner in which Dick & Co. secured, at an auction sale of a Wild West show, a six-paddle Indian war canoe. All their problems in getting this canoe into serviceable condition made highly interesting reading. The host of adventures that surrounded their vacation at Lake Pleasant proved thrilling indeed to our readers. How they met and contested with the canoe clubs from other high schools was delightfully set forth. The efforts of Fred Ripley to spoil the fun of Dick & Co. during that vacation, formed another strong feature of the tale.

We now find our young high school friends, just after the Fourth of July, at a very exciting point in their careers. As has been intimated, Harry Hazelton's and Dan Dalzell's parents had grown nervous about the canoeing sport, and had urged their sons not to enter the craft again. As Dick & Co. had always been companions in all forms of sport, the other four chums had promptly decided to sell the canoe, if possible, and to devote the proceeds to going off in the "real woods" to camp.

And now a probable customer at Porthampton had been found, and Dick had departed by train to see whether the sale could be effected.

"I've twenty cents left. Is there money enough in the crowd to buy five ice creams?" asked Tom Reade, displaying two dimes.

"I've a whole half dollar, though you won't believe it until you see it," laughed Dave Darrin.

"Then there's enough for cream," decided Tom.

"I'll put in my half, if you fellows say so," Dave went on. "But we may soon be in need of quite a bit of money. Wouldn't it be better to hold on to our fruit of the mint?"

"When we sell the canoe we'll have plenty of money," suggested Danny Grin.

"Very true, old Smilax," nodded Dave. "But what if Dick doesn't sell it?"

"Then we won't have plenty of money," responded Greg promptly.

"If Dick doesn't make a sale to the parties he has gone to see," Dave went on argumentatively, "we may want money to buy him a ticket to some other town. It won't be wise to spend our little capital until we see some more money coming in."

"That sounds like common sense," agreed Reade, dropping his dimes back into his pocket. "Still, I'm sorry that we're not rich enough to finance the ice cream proposition and still have enough capital left."

“So am I sorry,” sighed Danny Grin. “This waiting for Dick Prescott to get back with the news is a wearing proposition.”

“Come down to my house,” suggested Dave. “I’ve got that catalogue from the tent and camping goods house. Let’s go and look over the catalogue, and try to decide just what we want to buy for our camp when Dick gets the money for the canoe.”

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"That would be bully fun, if we really knew that Dick had sold the canoe," smiled young Holmes wistfully. "However, until we do know, I suggest that we avoid all false hopes and keep away from all catalogues."

At this instant Tom nudged Dave. Two men were passing, and one of them was saying to the other:

"Yes; I sold the double house for eighty-two hundred dollars—a clear profit of twenty-two hundred. Then I put four thousand more with that money and bought the Miller place. Within a couple of years I'll get rid of the Miller place for at least sixteen thousand dollars. I've never known a time when real estate money came in as easily."

"Is he talking about real money?" grunted Darrin. "He can't be!"

"He is," Tom declared. "That's Buller, of Wrenville. He is a very successful man in real estate. Father knows him."

"Humph! Talking of thousands, when a few ten dollar bills would fix us for the summer," muttered Dave Darrin. "I wonder if men ever stop to think how it feels for a boy to go around broke."

"I spoke to my dad along those lines once," smiled Tom.

"What did he say?" asked Danny Grin.

"Oh, dad told me there was no objection whatever to my starting out and earning a lot of money. He explained that was how he had gotten his."

The other youngsters were smiling now, for, as was well known to them all, Mr. Reade wasn't credited with possessing a great deal of money.

"Well, are you fellows coming down to my place to look over the catalogue?" Dave proposed once more. "It'll help to kill time during our suspense."

Though they felt rather foolish about spending their dollars before they obtained them, the four high school boys turned to follow Darrin, when a voice behind them called:

"Oh, boys! Just a moment, please!"

"It's the man in the four-quart silk hat," Tom whispered, as the five chums baited and turned.

"Man?" echoed Darry, though also in a whisper. "Humph! Hibbert looks more like a boy who has run away from home with his father's wardrobe."

Certainly, as he hurried toward them, Mr. Hibbert did look youthful. He couldn't have been more than twenty-two—perhaps he was a year younger than that. He was not very tall, nor very stout. His round, rosy, cherubic, smoothly shaven face made him look almost girlish. He was faultlessly, expensively dressed, though on this hot July afternoon a black frock coat and high silk hat looked somewhat out of keeping with the day's weather report.

"I just wanted to ask you boys to do me something of a favor," Mr. Alonzo Hibbert went on.

"Name the favor, please," urged Tom with drawling gentleness.

"Can you tell me what shop that is over there?" inquired Mr. Hibbert, pointing, with a dapper cane, across the street.

"That is Anderson's Ice Cream Emporium," Tom answered gravely.

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"Let's go over there," proposed Mr. Hibbert smiling, as he glanced from one face to another.

"That proposition was just before the house, and was voted down," Tom continued.

"What was the matter, boys?" demanded young Mr. Hibbert beamingly. "Didn't you have the price?"

"On the contrary, we had the price," Reade answered, as gravely as ever. "However, after discussion, we decided that we had other uses for our capital."

"But I haven't any other uses for my present capital," pursued Mr. Hibbert, as smiling as ever. "So come along, please."

Instead of jumping at the offer, Dick's partners regarded the man in the four-quart hat with some doubt. Often, when offered a courtesy from strangers that they would like to accept, these boys were likely to regard the offer with this same attitude of suspicion. It was not that Dick & Co. meant to be ungracious to strangers, but rather that their boyish experience with the world had taught them that such offers from strangers usually have strings attached to them.

"Don't you young men like ice cream?" asked Mr. Hibbert, looking fully as astonished as he felt.

"Certainly we do, Mr. Hibbert," Tom responded. "But what's the idea? What do you want us to do for you?"

"I ask you for the pleasure of your company," explained Mr. Hibbert. "I'm a stranger in this town, and I'd like a little company."

"And—afterwards?" pursued Reade.

"'Afterwards'?" repeated Alonzo Hibbert looking puzzled.

"What do you want us to do for you by and by?" Tom asked.

"Oh, I see," replied Hibbert, laughing with keen enjoyment. "You think my invitation a bait for services that I expect presently to demand. Nothing of the sort, I assure you. All I want is someone to talk to for the next half hour. Won't you oblige me?"

"Mr. Hibbert," broke in Dave suddenly, "I've just happened to remember that there is a man in town who wants to talk with you. We met him at the station, and he inquired where he could find you."

"I think I know whom you mean," admitted Hibbert.

“We told him you were stopping at the Eagle Hotel,” Greg added.

“Then, if the man who is looking for me went to the Eagle Hotel, he has already learned that I am elsewhere. It’s his business to find me, not mine to run about town seeking him. He can find me as well in the ice cream shop as in any other place. Will you young men oblige me with your company?”

At a nod from Darrin the others fell in line. Mr. Hibbert led the way across the street, entering the shop, which proved to be empty of other customers.

As the waitress approached the two tables to take the orders for ice cream the host of the occasion turned to his guests.

“Give the young woman your orders, gentlemen,” said Alonzo Hibbert.

“Strawberry,” said Tom.

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"Vanilla," requested Dave.

"Oh, fudge!" interposed their host.

"We haven't any fudge ice cream, sir," remarked the waitress without smiling.

"I cried fudge on their orders," remarked Hibbert gayly. "They are too modest. Young woman, have you still some of those cantaloupes, which you cut open and fill with different flavors of cream and water ice?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, young gentlemen, permit me to change the order to one of those cantaloupes for each of you."

The waitress departed on her errand, while Reade and Darrin glanced at each other, somewhat aghast. The delicacy ordered by Mr. Hibbert cost a quarter of a dollar a portion.

When the orders were brought and placed on the table, Alonzo Hibbert draw from his pocket a roll of bills, stripping off the outermost and handing it to the waitress. Yet their host gave no sign of attempting to make a vulgar display of his money. He seemed rather unconscious of the possession of it.

"Are these favorites of yours?" inquired Mr. Hibbert presently of Greg, indicating the multi-colored load of ices, each resting in a half of a cantaloupe.

"Not exactly favorites," Greg replied. "We don't often have the money to spend on such an expensive treat."

"Don't you?" inquired Hibbert in a tone of considerable surprise, as though wondering why everyone in the world wasn't as well supplied with money as he himself was.

Then, after a pause, their host asked of Greg:

"Would you like always to have plenty of money?"

"I suppose everyone would like that," murmured young Holmes.

"Shall I make a prediction?" inquired Hibbert.

"By all means, if it pleases you," Greg answered politely.

"Then, Greg Holmes, I venture to assert that you will very shortly find yourself a millionaire."

This was said with so much earnestness, and apparent sincerity, that all five of the chums now regarded their host intently.

"How soon is that going to happen?" Greg laughingly inquired.

"Within a week," Alonzo Hibbert replied as seriously as ever. He glanced at Greg with a look full of friendly interest.

Tom Reade snorted, almost audibly, then drew down the corners of his mouth to keep himself from laughing outright. Dave, too, took another swift look at their smiling young host.

"I wish you were a sure prophet," murmured Greg trying hard not to laugh.

"I am," declared Mr. Hibbert seriously. "Mind what I tell you, Greg Holmes, within a week you will know yourself to be a millionaire."

"Real money?" demanded Greg.

"Real money," nodded Hibbert positively. "Or else it will be in stocks, bonds or real estate that could be converted into real money."

By this time, Tom, Dave and the others, Greg included, had taken Alonzo Hibbert's measure or believed they had. Their host, then, was a lunatic. A harmless and very amiable lunatic, to be sure, yet none the less the victim of a deranged mind.

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"Eaten up your creams?" asked Mr. Hibbert, glancing around. "Then we'll have another apiece."

He signaled the waitress, giving the order.

"Don't ask me—yet—how I know," continued their host, turning once more to Greg Holmes, "but you're going to find yourself a millionaire within a week. I know it. It's all in your ear."

As he spoke Hibbert gave Greg's right ear a playful tweak.

"All in Greg's ear?" muttered Tom Reade under his breath. "I knew that from the outset."

"All in your ear, Holmes!" Hibbert repeated. "Yet it will all be very real money. Oh, won't you be astonished!"

"I—I think I shall, when the wealth rains down upon me," murmured Greg, now afraid to raise his eyes to meet the mocking glance that Darry was sending toward him.

At this moment the stranger of the railway station entered the room, then came toward the table.

"Mr. Hibbert, here is the man who was inquiring for you at the station," Tom announced in a low voice.

Hibbert turned, glancing inquiringly at the stranger.

"Are you Mr. Hibbert?" asked the latter.

"Yes," nodded the man in the four-quart hat. "My name is Colquitt," explained the stranger. "I am from-----"

"Er—yes, quite so," murmured Mr. Hibbert. "And here is the boy. He is named Greg Holmes. Do you observe his right ear?"

"I do," Colquitt assented, after a swift, keen glance.

"He is the boy," Hibbert repeated after a moment's hesitation.

"Where do you live, young man?" asked Colquitt.

Greg supplied the name of his street and the number.

"Name of your family physician?" went on the stranger.



"Dr. Bentley."

"Has he always been your family physician?"

"Ever since I can remember," Greg declared.

"Thank you," and Colquitt turned to leave.

"Won't you stay and have an ice with us?" urged Hibbert.

"Too much to do," replied Colquitt, shaking his head and walking out.

Now the high school boys found themselves doubly, trebly puzzled. If Mr. Hibbert were an amiable lunatic, what of Colquitt? Both had appeared to know something mysterious about young Holmes.

Tom Reade, also, was thinking deeply. Dave Darrin was frowning. Dan Dalzell was grinning slightly, while Hazelton was giving his whole attention to the second ice before him.

Hibbert, however, passed to other topics as lightly as though he had already forgotten all about fortunes and ears. The time passed pleasantly until all of the five chums felt that they could hold no more ices. Then Hibbert, having paid the bill, left the ice cream place with them.

Outside they encountered Mr. Colquitt once more.

"May I have a word aside with you, sir?" demanded Colquitt.

"A dozen," agreed Hibbert readily.

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The two walked apart from the boys, going down the sidewalk together slowly. But the youngsters heard Hibbert say earnestly:

"I tell you, Colquitt, that is the boy. He has the ear and all. And he'll be in luck with the money he'll have!"

"And I tell you, Mr. Hibbert, that he isn't the boy at all," retorted Colquitt, with even greater positiveness.

More was said, but the two passed out of hearing.

"Greg," declared Tom Reade solemnly, "it appears that you're the million-dollar kid!"

"I know it," grinned young Holmes. "I am! Also it seems equally certain that I am not!"

"What do you make of the whole business, fellows?" Tom asked, turning to the other chums.

"I've my own idea," laughed Dave Darrin.

"Give it us, quickly!" begged Danny Grin.

"My idea," Dave declared, "is that Hibbert is a rather harmless lunatic, yet one who has to be watched a bit."

"Then what about Colquitt?" urged Hazelton.

"Colquitt," guessed Darry, "is Hibbert's keeper."

"The mild lunatic idea," Tom observed, "fits in well with a chap who, in this sweltering July weather, will insist on wearing a four-quart silk hat, a spite-fence collar and a long, black, double-breasted coat."

"There's only one part of the whole dream that I'd like to believe," sighed young Holmes. "I'd be quite willing to have it proved to me that I'm a young millionaire!"

"What would you do if you had the million—right in your hand?" quizzed Danny Grin.

"I'd transfer it to my pockets," Greg answered.

"What next?" pressed Dan.

"I'd hurry to the bank with the money."

"And—then?" Dan still insisted.



"Then," supplied practical Tom Reade, "he'd end our suspense by paying Dick ninety dollars for our war canoe!"

"I would," Greg agreed.

CHAPTER II

DICK AND SOME HIGH FINANCE

"I feel like a fellow without any manners," complained Dave Darrin.

"What have you done now?" asked Greg, coming out of his million-dollar trance.

"It's what I haven't done," Darry answered. "It's also what none of us have done. We haven't thanked our very pleasant, even if slightly erratic, host for his entertainment."

"We can't very well butt in," declared Reade, glancing down the street. "Hibbert and his kee—I mean, his friend—are still talking earnestly. I wonder if they lock poor Hibbert up part of the time?"

Colquitt and young Mr. Hibbert had now turned in at the Eagle Hotel. Dave glanced at his watch, remarking:

"Fellows, it's ten minutes after six. Those of you who want any supper will do well to hurry home."

"I'm certain that I can't eat a bit of supper," declared Hazelton, looking almost alarmed. "I've eaten so much of that cream and cantaloupe that I haven't a cubic inch of space left for anything else."

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Nevertheless the high school boys parted, going their various directions, after having agreed to meet by seven o'clock. All wanted to be on hand when Prescott got back to town.

After supper Greg had not been out of the house five minutes when Mr. Hibbert appeared at the gate of the Holmes cottage, and passed inside. The caller inquired for Greg's father, met that gentleman, and the two remained in private conversation for some five minutes.

Ere the first minute was over, however, Greg's father might have been heard, from the sidewalk, laughing uproariously. Finally Mrs. Holmes was called into the conference. She came forth again, looking somewhat amused.

From that meeting Hibbert went back to Main Street, where he fell in with Tom Colquitt.

"Are you satisfied, now?" demanded the latter.

"I'm puzzled," replied Hibbert, with the air and tone of a man who hates to give up a delusion.

Colquitt and Hibbert had not gone a block and a half ere they encountered Dave, Tom and the others, only Dick being absent from the gathering of the chums. Curiously, too, the meeting took place before the same ice cream shop.

"Just in time to have some more cream, boys," suggested young Mr. Hibbert.

"And we'd enjoy it, too, thank you," responded Tom courteously, "but there is a point, sir, past which it would be imposition to go. So we are going to content ourselves with enjoying a very pleasant recollection of the good time we had with you this afternoon."

"Better come inside with us," urged Mr. Colquitt. "I notice a table, away over in the corner, where we can be by ourselves. You see, boys, after what Hibbert said to one of your number this afternoon, we feel that an explanation is due to you. We can explain inside much better than we could on a street corner."

That crowbar of curiosity wedged the boys away from their fear that they were accepting too much from strangers. So they followed their mysterious conductors inside. Young Mr. Hibbert ordered ices similar to those that had been enjoyed that afternoon. Then Mr. Colquitt, with a brisk air, began:

"Concerning that suspicion that young Holmes might be the missing heir to a large sum of money, I'll tell you how Mr. Hibbert got his idea."

Then, as though fearing that he had made too great a promise, Mr. Colquitt paused.

“It’s this way,” he went on, at last. “Many years ago there was a railway wreck in this part of the state. A good many passengers were killed. Among them was the wife of a wealthy man. The husband escaped with his life, but he was so badly hurt that, for a year or so, his mind suffered. He had to be taken abroad. There were a few babies among those killed in the wreck, and the infant son of the couple was supposed to be one of them. The father is now well and healthy, but a very lonely man. Within the last few weeks this father has had some reason to believe that his son didn’t perish in the wreck, but that other people, believing both parents had been killed, took charge of the infant.

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"That is all," continued Mr. Colquitt, "except that the missing infant had a small v-shaped nick on the outer edge of his right ear. Probably with the boy's growth, if he is still alive, the nick has become so small as to be barely noticeable, like the nick in Holmes' right ear. Mr. Hibbert came to Gridley only yesterday, and it happened that one of the first young men he saw, close to the hotel, was young Holmes. Rather by chance Hibbert saw that very small nick, that usually would escape notice. In great excitement Hibbert telegraphed the anxious father, and the father wired Blinders' detective agency, which sent me down to Gridley."

"It isn't possible that Greg can be the missing son," breathed Tom Reade incredulously.

"He isn't," declared Tom Colquitt promptly. "I made sure of that very soon after I reached town to-day. First of all, I found out the name of the family physician, Dr. Bentley. I saw that gentleman, and he assured me he knew that young Holmes was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Holmes, for Dr. Bentley told me that he signed young Greg's birth certificate. That was proof enough, but I also saw Mr. and Mrs. Holmes, a few minutes ago. The missing son of the wealthy man in question had two other marks on his body that would identify him."

"What are those marks?" asked Dave Darrin deeply interested.

Tom Colquitt hesitated, glancing at young Mr. Hibbert.

"Tell 'em," nodded the young man of the four-quart hat.

"The young man we are seeking," replied the detective, "will have a brownish mole over his right shoulder blade and a reddish mark to the left of his breast bone. The boy was born with those marks. The nick in his ear resulted from an accident when the nurse was handling the child."

"We'll find the youngster for you," promised Danny Grin lightly.

"And is Mr. Hibbert a detective, too?" asked Tom Reade.

"No," replied Colquitt, with great promptness, while Mr. Hibbert, grinning sheepishly, added:

"I haven't brains enough for that, I guess. But, Master Holmes, please tell me, to satisfy my last doubt. Have you any such marks as Mr. Colquitt has described?"

"I never noticed such marks on myself," Greg replied.

"He hasn't them," Dave interjected, "or the rest of us would have noticed the marks when we've been in swimming."

"Then your last idea that Gregory Holmes is the missing young man must vanish now, my dear Mr. Hibbert," smiled Mr. Colquitt.

"I'm vanquished," confessed Alonzo Hibbert, with a sigh. "I'm no good at anything. I wouldn't even make a detective."

"I must leave you now," suggested Mr. Colquitt, rising. "I must wire to—er—to my client. Poor man, he will be greatly disappointed."

As the detective rose and passed outside Hazelton leaned over to murmur to young Holmes:

"Don't you wish it had turned out that you were the million-dollar kid?"

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"Not if I had to give up my father and mother," Greg replied, with great promptness.

"I seem to be a fool at everything," sighed Alonzo Hibbert in disgust.

"No; I would say, sir," suggested Tom Reade, "that you made the mistake of proceeding on one sign, instead of looking for all three."

"Have another ice!" urged Mr. Hibbert, brightening at once. "You have set me straight. I wasn't a fool, after all—merely too swift"

But the boys shook their heads as they murmured their thanks.

So they were about to rise when a voice called cheerily behind them:

"Stay where you are, fellows. We'll have an ice cream all around."

"Dick!" cried five eager voices at once, as Prescott came smilingly to join them. Then their eyes all framed the same question, which their lips refused to utter.

"Did you sell the canoe?"

As Dick glanced inquiringly at young Mr. Hibbert, Dave Darrin presented him. Dick also learned that Hibbert had been a willing host to five of the chums.

"Now, you'll turn about and eat an ice cream with us, won't you, Mr. Hibbert?" urged young Prescott.

This the young man consented to do, though, as soon as the dainty had been disposed of, he begged to be excused that he might go and have further talk with Tom Colquitt.

"You sold the canoe, I think, Dick?" said Tom, as soon as their late host had left them.

"Yes," beamed their leader.

"You might tell us what you got for it," urged Danny Grin.

"Guess," hinted Dick.

"Fifty," said Dave promptly.

"He said he wouldn't take less than ninety," retorted Hazelton.

"Ninety dollars," guessed Tom.

"Fellows," laughed Dick, "at one time on the train I was so downhearted and glum over the chances of a trade that I believe I would have jumped at fifty dollars. Then I

remembered my promise not to take less than ninety dollars. With that I soared to a hundred dollars, then down, by degrees, to seventy. But my promise pulled me back to ninety.”

“It wasn’t exactly a promise,” Dave broke in. “Anyway, Dick, it wasn’t the kind of promise that had to be kept.”

“Half the time I felt that the promise had to be kept, and the other half of the time I felt that it might better be broken,” Prescott went on, laughingly. “Just as I reached Porthampton, however, and saw all the fine summer homes there, my figures began to rise. I realized, of course, that a birch bark canoe is a good deal of a rarity in these days; that such a boat hasn’t anything like a hard-and-fast, staple value. A birch bark canoe, in other words, is worth what it will bring.”

“And no more,” nodded Dave Darrin. “So you were wise to take the fifty dollars.”

“Who said that I took fifty dollars for the canoe?” Dick smiled back.

“What did you get?” insisted Harry Hazelton, his impatience increasing with every minute.

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"Do you really want to know what I got?" teased Dick.

"Of course I do," snorted Harry. "We all do!"

"Then I'll tell you," nodded Dick. Instead, however, he began feeling in his pockets.

"Tell us, then!" ordered Hazelton gruffly.

"I got a check," smiled Dick.

"For how much?" pressed Hazelton.

"Well, let me explain," said Dick, still laughing. "You see, I didn't have to do any describing or praising of the canoe, for Mr. Eades, who bought the canoe for his crowd, was here three days ago, as you know, and looked the canoe over, in water and out. It was just a question of settling the price of the canoe. So, when I reached Mr. Eades, we started in to bargain. He asked me how much I wanted for the canoe. I guess, fellows, my nerve must have gone to my head, for I told him two hundred dollars."

"You didn't get it?" gasped Hazelton.

"I didn't," Dick answered soberly.

"How much-----"

"Mr. Eades told me he represented himself and associates, who wanted the canoe to put on the little lake down at their country club. I told him it seemed to me that a canoe like ours was an expensive sort of thing to put in a pond. Then he offered me seventy-five dollars."

"That's a good, round sum, and will help us out a lot this summer," nodded Dave Darrin. "I'm glad you accepted it."

"I didn't," smiled Dick. "Mr. Eades finally offered eighty, and I told him I regretted that we hadn't done the trading at the time that he came over to Gridley to see the canoe. Mr. Eades replied that at the time he came here he wasn't authorized to speak for his friends, but merely to look at the canoe and report. After that he made one or two more small increases in his price, but I seemed to have lost interest in the subject of a trade and looked at my time table to see when the next train left for Gridley. Then we talked about other matters, and, fellows, I was pretty glum, though I didn't allow the fact to show. Finally, he offered me more money, and then a little more. At last I came down on my price, and made him my final offer. Mr. Eades didn't seem to like it, and then, all of a sudden, he took out his check book and wrote a check for me."

“Close to a hundred dollars?” asked Dave, with deep interest.

For answer Dick threw the check on the table. There was a wild scramble for it.

“A hundred and fifty dollars!” gasped Tom Reade.

“Let me see that check!” demanded Greg Holmes unbelievably.

The check went from hand to hand, each of the fellows looking at it half bewildered. Yet certainly the check said one hundred and fifty dollars.

“See here, Dick,” asked Tom anxiously, “are you sure——positive, that is——that it was honest to charge a hundred and fifty for that canoe of ours?”

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"You may be sure that I thought of that," Prescott answered. "I don't want to defraud any man. But birch bark suitable for canoes is getting to be a thing of the past in this country. Our friend, Hiram Driggs, the boat builder, told me that a birch bark canoe, nowadays, is simply worth all one can get for it. But, after Mr. Eades had written the check and handed it to me, he said: 'Now, the trade is made and closed, Prescott, what do you really consider the canoe worth?' I answered him a good deal as I've answered you, and offered to return the check if Mr. Eades wasn't satisfied. Fellows, for just a moment or two my heart was in my mouth for fear he'd take me up and ask for the return of his check. But Mr. Eades merely smiled, and said he was satisfied if I was."

"I'll bet he'd have gone to a two hundred dollar price," declared Hazelton. "Dick, weren't you sorry, afterwards, that you didn't hold out flat for two hundred dollars?"

"Not I," young Prescott answered promptly. "If I had been too greedy I'd have deserved to lose altogether, and very likely I would have lost. Fellows, I think we can be well satisfied with the price we've obtained."

"I am!" declared Dave Darrin promptly. "We've realized a hundred dollars above my wildest dream."

Incidentally it may be mentioned that Mr. Eades found, from his friends, that he had a prize, indeed, in the fine old war canoe. The grounds committee of another country club offered two hundred and fifty for that same canoe a month later.

"Now, fellows," Dick went on, "suppose we leave here and decide how we're to lay out this money for our summer camp?"

The vote was carried instantly. With a whoop of glee the chums started for Dave's house.

CHAPTER III

THE HUMAN MYSTERY OF THE WOODS

"Now, get to work!" shouted Dick Prescott. "Destruction to all shirkers!"

"Please may I beg off for five minutes?" begged Danny Grin, raising one hand.

"Why?" queried Prescott sharply.

"I want to take that much time to convince myself that it's all true," replied Danny.

"You'll know that it's all true when you wake up to-morrow morning," laughed Dick. "But it won't look half as real if any fellow shirks any part of his work now. All ready, fellows?"

“Ready!” came the chorus.

“Tom Reade will make the best foreman, won’t he?” appealed Prescott. “Tom has a knack for just such jobs as this, and it’s going to be a tough one.”

The boys stood in the middle of a half acre clearing in the deep woods, five miles past the town of Porter. Here the woods extended for miles in every direction. As these young campers glanced about them it seemed as though they possessed a wealth of camping material—far more than they had ever dreamed of owning.

The tent, twelve feet by twenty, and eleven feet high at the ridgepole, with six-foot walls, was their greatest single treasure. It had cost thirty-five dollars, and had been bought from the nearest large city.

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"We'll get the tent up first," called Reade.

"Of course," smiled Dave. "That's all you're boss of anyway, Tom."

"Come on, then, and spread the canvas out," Tom ordered. "Bring it over this way. We want it under the trees at the edge of the clearing. Dan, you bring the longest poles."

Under Tom's further direction the canvas was spread just where he wanted it. Then the ridge-pole was secured in place across the tops of the highest two standing poles.

"Run it in under the canvas," Tom directed. "We'll get the metal tips of the poles through the proper roof holes in the canvas. There, that's right. Dick, you and Greg stand by that long pole; Dave, you and Dan by the other. Now, then—raise her!"

Up off the ground went the two uprights and the ridge-pole, the canvas hanging shapelessly from the ridge-pole.

"Bring that wooden sledge over here, Harry," was Foreman Reade's next order. "Now, drive in this stake while I hold it. Remember to hit the stake, not my hands."

The stake being soon driven into place Reade slipped the loop of a guy-rope around it, partly tightening the rope. Then he slipped to the next corner, where the process was repeated.

"Hurrah!" burst from Danny Grin, as the fourth corner stake was driven, and now the tent began to take shape.

"You fellows holding the poles may let go of them now," called Tom. "Come and help with the other stakes and guy-ropes."

As soon as the ropes along a given side of the tent had been made fast the side wall poles were stepped into place. At last the task of tent-raising was completed, save for the final tightening of all the ropes. Now Dick and Dave, under their foreman's orders, began to drive the shorter stakes that held the bottoms of the tent walls in place.

"Hurrah!" went up from several throats, as the boys stood back to take in the full dimensions of their big, new tent.

"My but she's a whopper!" exclaimed Danny Grin, pushing back the door flaps and peering inside.

"We won't find the tent any too large for a crowd of our size," Dick declared. "You all remember how crowded we were in the tent that we used last summer. You'll find we can fill this tent up when we get it furnished."

“Dick,” called Tom, “take all of my gang except Harry. He and I will lay the floor.”

Reade and Hazelton thereupon began to carry in two-by-four timbers and lay them where they wanted them on the ground inside the tent. Next they nailed boards across. They had bought all of this timber in Gridley secondhand at a bargain.

“Dave, you and Dan can start the furnace, while Greg and I unpack supplies,” suggested Prescott.

Thereupon Darrin and Danny Grin started in to move a small pile of bricks. Next a tub of mixed mortar was carried to the level spot decided upon as the place whereon to erect the “furnace.”

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It was not much of a stove that Dave and Dan built, yet it was fitted and destined for the preparing of many a meal in record time. First of all, Dave marked off the space to be used. Four parallel lines of bricks, each line five bricks long, were laid on the ground. Dave, with a two-foot rule, measured a distance of sixteen inches between each row. Then began some amateur brick-laying. It was not perfectly done, by any means, yet these four parallel walls of brick that were presently up afforded three “stoves” lying side by side. As soon as the mortar was reasonably dried—and fire would help—grates and pieces of sheet iron could be laid across the tops of the walls over the three fires. It was one of the simplest and most effective cooking devices that such a camp could have. There was even a gas-stove oven, an old one, furnished by Dick’s mother.

“It makes me hungry to look at the stove,” declared Danny Grin.

“It’s four o’clock now, so you’ll have two hours more to wait,” smiled Dick, as he glanced at his watch.

Out of packing cases and some odds and ends of lumber Dick and Greg had constructed some very fair cupboards, with doors.

“Oh, if we only had ice for use in this hot weather!” sighed Greg.

“But we haven’t,” returned Dick, “so what’s the use of thinking of it.”

In the tent Tom and Harry were putting in some of the last taps of the hammer. They had made a very creditable job of the flooring. It was now five o’clock. Dick & Co. had worked so briskly that they were now somewhat tired.

It had been an exciting day. They had left Gridley in the forenoon, journeying for an hour and a half on the train. Arriving at Porter the boys had eaten luncheons brought along with them. Then they had hunted up a farmer, had bargained with him to haul their stuff and then had tramped out to their camping place.

But the camp looked as though bound to prove a success. It was their camp, anyway, and they were happy.

“I’m glad enough of one thing,” murmured Dick as he rested, mopping his brow.

“I’m glad of several things I can think of,” rejoined Darry.

“The thing I refer to,” chuckled Prescott, “is Fred Ripley.”

“It never occurred to me to feel glad about Ripley,” muttered Tom dryly.

“I mean, I’m glad that he has gone to Canada with his father this summer,” Dick continued. “We shan’t have a lot of things happening all the time, as we did last

summer. Rip was a hoodoo to us last summer. This year we know that he's too far away to be troublesome."

"It will seem a bit strange, at first," assented Reade, "to return to our camp and not discover that, while we were away, Rip had been along and slashed the tent to ribbons, or committed some other atrocious act."

"Let's not crow until we're out of the woods," suggested Darrin. "Rip might come back from Canada, you know."

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"He's sure to, if the Canadians find out the kind of a chap that he is," Danny Grin declared solemnly.

"Come here, you fellows," summoned Dick, "and hold a council of war over the supplies, to decide what we'll have for supper."

"I thought the steak was to be the main item," Tom rejoined. "With no ice it won't keep until morning."

"What do you want to eat with the steak?" asked Dick briskly.

The council—of six—quickly decided on the items of the meal. Harry, catching up two buckets, started to the nearest spring for water. Dave, with the coffee-mill between his knees, started to grind. Dick, with an old knife, began to cut the steak up into suitably sized pieces. Greg started a fire in one of the stove spaces,

Dan bringing more firewood. A task was at hand for each of them.

When the first fire was ready an old grate was placed over it. On this the pieces of steak were arranged. Dave was boiling coffee on another grate over the second fire.

"Wood is mighty scarce around here," complained Harry.

Dick glanced about him. No one was immediately busy.

"All scatter!" called Prescott. "Go in different directions. Each fellow bring back an armful of dry wood. Hustle!"

Dick himself was the first to return, about three minutes later. He came in fast, for he expected that the steak would be ready to remove from the grate.

Long before he reached the stoves, however, Dick dropped his wood and his lower jaw simultaneously.

"Hurry up, fellows!" he called hoarsely. "Hurry and see what has happened!"

That note of real distress in his voice caused the others to come running.

"Well, if you haven't an appetite!" gasped Tom. "To go and eat all the steak yourself!"

"I didn't eat any of it," Dick retorted grimly. "From the looks of things none of the rest of us will eat any of it, either."

"A dog got it, or some wild animal!" guessed Greg.

"No one animal could carry off four pieces of steak in his mouth at a time," Prescott answered, thinking fast. "And the tin plate I left here has gone with the meat. Animals don't lug off tin plates."

"Dick and I will stay behind to watch and take account of stock," Tom called. "The rest of you scatter through the woods and try to come up with the thief. If any fellow comes upon him, give a whoop, and the rest of us will hurry along."

The four scouts went off on the run.

"Anything else missing?" asked Reade, as Dick looked among the supplies.

"Yes," Prescott raged; "one of the bottles of Worcestershire sauce and two of the tins of corn. Oh, it's a two-legged thief that has spoiled our supper!"

"Perhaps you were too sure about Rip being off in Canada," grinned Reade.

"Fred Ripley would hardly steal food," Prescott retorted. "Rip is seldom really hungry. Tom, I'd give a dollar to know just who was hanging around this camp."

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"I'd give two dollars to know," snapped Reade, "but I'd take the money from the camp treasury."

"Queer that the fellow didn't take the potatoes, too," mused Dick, turning back to the stove.

"The potatoes weren't done," suggested Reade wisely, "and probably our visitor didn't think it wise to wait until they were. The hulled corn will serve his purpose very well, though."

"It was a mean trick to play on us," quivered Dick.

"Of course it was—unless the thief were really very hungry," answered Tom.

"In that case, I don't believe I'd blame the fellow so much," Dick admitted. "But now, what are we going to have for supper?"

"I've an inspiration," Tom declared, as he thrust a fork into some of the potatoes in the pot. "These potatoes will be done in two or three minutes more. Open three tins of the corned beef."

"Tinned corned beef isn't so much of an inspiration, as inspirations go," laughed Dick.

"Open the three tins," Tom insisted. "Here are the onions. I'll peel a few—and do the weeping for the whole camp."

Tom was busy at once. Dick, after watching his friend start, caught something of the spirit of quick work.

"Dump the meat into this chopping bowl," Tom continued, as he hastily dropped peeled onion after onion into the wooden bowl. "Now, get the potatoes off the fire, and we'll drain and peel 'em."

This work was quickly under way.

"Do you see what the poem is to be?" grinned Reade.

"Looks like corned beef hash," smiled Dick.

"It will taste like it, too," predicted Reade. "Come on, now!"

Potatoes were quickly made ready. Tom began to chop the mixture, while Prescott got out one of the frying pans.

"Get out the lard," urged Tom. "Let's have some of this stuff cooking by the time that the fellows come in. It will console them a bit."

"It begins to smell good," murmured Dick presently, as he stirred the cooking mixture.

Tom busied himself with setting the table.

"All ready, when the fellows come in," announced Dick, as he removed the coffee pot and began to cut bread. "Better call 'em."

Placing his hands over his mouth, megaphone shape, Tom sent several loud halloos echoing through the woods.

Dan was the first one in. Greg arrived next, Harry third.

"Where can Dave be?" asked Tom, after several more halloos.

"We'll go and find him, if he doesn't show up," suggested Harry. "But first of all, let's stow some of this supper inside of us."

"We'll wait for Dave before we eat," Dick retorted quickly.

"Hello, Dave, hello!" roared Reade and Prescott in concert "Supper is ready! Hurry up."

"Queer there's no answer," said Greg, after a minute's wait.

"Something must have happened to Dave," suggested Danny Grin anxiously.

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"What could happen to him?" demanded Hazelton scornfully. "Darry can take care of himself. He'll be in presently."

"Let's call him again!" urged Dan.

They called in concert, their voices echoing through the woods.

"Did you hear that?" asked Dick eagerly, after a pause of listening. "There it goes again."

"It's Dave, answering us," Harry declared.

The hail sounded distant.

"Come on!" cried Dick, leaping forward. "That yell was one of trouble, or I'm a bad guesser. Dan, you and Hazelton stand by the camp. Tom and Greg come along. If Dave is in trouble he'll be sure to need some of us!"

CHAPTER IV

DAVE DARRIN IS ANGRY

"Keep on calling, Dave!" shouted Dick, as they ran toward the sound of the voice.

"This way!" answered Darry, his voice sounding louder as they neared him.

"What's up?" Tom asked as they ran.

Dave's voice sounded in wrathful explosion.

"Eh?" Tom pressed him.

"Wait until you get here, and you'll see," retorted Dave.

"You're not hurt?" Dick shouted.

"No; but my feelings are!" vented Darrin indignantly.

Another minute and the trio headed by Dick, reached the spot.

By this time darkness was coming on through the woods. Prescott, who was in the lead, at first received the impression that Dave was standing beside a tree. And so Dave was, though the reason for his standing there was yet to be explained.

A moment more and Tom and Dick had reached the spot where the wrathful Darrin was standing.

“Well, of all the-----” began Tom wonderingly.

“Outrages!” finished Darry angrily.

Prescott laughed outright.

“I suppose I must be a comical-looking object,” admitted Dave Darrin ruefully. “But just wait until I lay my hands on the rascal who played this trick on me! Oh, I’ll make him ache for his smartness.”

Though Darrin had an unusually quick temper, he generally had it under excellent control. Now, however, he was so indignant that he fairly sputtered, and the humorous side of the situation did not appeal to him.

What Dick saw was that Dave stood with his back to the trunk of the tree. Around Darry’s neck a noose was fast. Back of the prisoner the rope had been wrapped once around the trunk of the tree. Next, several folds of rope had been passed both around Darrin and the tree trunk in such fashion that the boy’s arms were pinioned fast to his sides. In addition, a single turn of rope had been taken around each arm. Finally, the rope had been knotted several times at the opposite side of the tree from that on which Darrin stood.

“You must have stood pretty patiently for anyone to be able to tie you up in that artistic fashion!” blurted Tom Reade.

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"Patient? Patient nothing!" growled Darry between his teeth. "I was so angry all the time that I couldn't keep from sputtering, but that rascal had me fast, and kept making me more secure."

"How old a man was he?" asked Dick.

"I don't know whether he was a man or a boy."

"Is your eyesight failing, Dave?" asked Tom.

"I haven't eyes in the back of my head," snapped Darry. "Say, aren't you fellows going to hurry up and free me?"

"Can't you free yourself?" suggested Reade.

"If I could have done that I'd now be ranging these woods in search of the perpetrator of this outrage," Darry declared. "Hurry up and untie me!"

"We will, but please be patient for a moment or two longer," begged young Prescott.

"This is such a cleverly artistic job that I want to study out just how it was done. How did the fellow attack you?"

"From behind," muttered Darry.

"But how?"

"Wait, and I'll tell you," Dave went on, forcing himself to talk a trifle more calmly. "When I'm free I'll show you the spot over there, in the thicket between the two clumps of bushes. Well, I had gotten this far when I saw the missing steaks. They rested on a tin pan on the ground in the thicket. It looked as though the thief of our supper had gone away to get water or something. I had just stepped, on tiptoe, of course, past this tree when I heard a soft step behind me. Before I could turn, the noose was dropped over my head, and then down on my neck. It was jerked tight, like a flash, and I was pulled against this tree. The fellow took some kind of hitch around the trunk of the tree to hold me-----"

"Yes; I see the hitch," assented Dick. "It was well done."

"So well done that it held me, for a moment," Dave went on. "The noose choked me, for a brief space, so that I didn't have much presence of mind. Before I recovered myself, the fellow had passed the rope several times around my body and arms, and had taken the extra loops on my arms. By that time I was so helpless that I couldn't stir to free myself."

"And you didn't see the fellow?" asked Dick.

“Not a glimpse of him. He worked from behind, and did his trick like lightning.”

“But there are no steaks, nor any plate, on the ground in the thicket now,” Reade reported, after looking.

“No,” Darry grunted. “The fellow who tried me up like this passed over my eyes a dirty cloth that perhaps he would call a handkerchief. Then I heard him over by the thicket. Next he was back here and had whisked that cloth away from my eyes. That was the last I heard of him.”

“Why didn’t you set up a roar as soon as he attacked you?” demanded Tom Reade.

“The noose bound my throat so tightly, I couldn’t,” Darry explained. “I was seeing stars, and I was dizzy. After he had taken a few hitches of the rope around me he eased up on the noose a bit.”

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"Did you 'holler' then?" questioned Dick.

"No," Dave Darrin admitted honestly. "I used up all my breath telling that unknown, unseen fellow just what I thought of him."

"If you want to know what I think of the fellow," uttered young Prescott, "it seems to me that the unknown chap is clever and bright enough to be capable of better things than stealing supper from other people. This tie-up is about the most ingenious thing I've seen in a long time."

"Maybe I'd appreciate it more," retorted Darry, "if I could see it as you do, on another fellow. Are you going to hurry up and cut away this rope?"

"Not if you are able to wait calmly while I untie it," Dick answered. "It's surely a good piece of rope. It will go part way toward paying for the steaks."

With that Prescott began to untie the knots. When his fingers ached from this from of exercise, Greg took his place. Meanwhile, Tom Reade explored the thicket where Dave had seen the plate of steaks. There was no sign of the food taken from the camp. This Tom made out by the aid of lighted matches, as the long shadows were now falling in the woods.

"I'm glad, now, that you didn't cut the rope," said Dave, as at last he stepped free. "We'll save his rope, for I hope to find that fellow again."

"What will you do to him if you catch him?" grinned Reade.

"Maybe I'll need the rope to lynch him with," uttered Darry grimly.

Tom threw back his head, laughing heartily.

"Our dear, savage, blood-thirsty old Darry!" Reade laughed. "You talk as vindictively as a pirate, but if you found your enemy hurt you'd drop everything else and nurse him back into condition. Darry, you know you would!"

"Let's get back to camp," urged Greg. "Supper is ready, but no one has had any yet. My stomach feels like an empty balloon."

"All right, then," agreed Darrin gruffly, "though I'd sooner catch that fellow than eat."

"That word, 'eat,' sounds like a poem!" sighed Greg, tightening his belt as the quartette turned campward.

"So you didn't get a single glimpse of your—your annoyer?" asked Prescott.

“Not what you could call a glimpse,” Darrin responded. “Two or three times I caught sight of the fellow’s shirt sleeves as he passed the rope around me. His shirt sleeves were of a light tan color, so I suppose that is the color of his entire shirt. That, however, is the sole clue I have to the scoundrel’s description.”

“I’d like to meet the fellow,” mused Dick.

“Maybe you’ll have that pleasure,” hinted Darry with the nearest approach to a smile he had yet shown.

“You mean you’d like to see me tied up in the same fashion, and then discover whether I could keep my temper under such circumstances?” laughed young Prescott.

“Never mind what I mean,” Dave retorted.

They were soon in camp, now, after calling to Dan and Harry two or three times in order to locate their way. At last, however, they came in sight of the glowing embers of fire and the rays of the two lanterns that Dan had lighted and hung up.



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"I smell something that smells mighty good," sniffed Dave. "Did any of you fellows recover the steaks? Have you been keeping something back from me?"

"I don't believe you'll find the steaks in camp," Dick retorted, "but you'll find something that will taste fully as good."

With that the quartette charged into camp. Everything was ready for the table by the time each fellow had washed his hands and face in the one tin basin that served the camp.

"Put one of those lanterns on the table, Dan," called Dick, as he finished drying himself on a towel. "Another night, if we eat after dark, we'll try to have a campfire that'll light the place up like an electric light."

"Another night, unless some of our neighbors move," predicted Darry, "we won't have food enough left to make it worth while to try to have supper!"

The boys sat down in great good humor, even Dave softening when he saw the bountiful supper that had been prepared. Not one of them felt nervous about the possible nearness of the late prowler. The boys were six to one, whoever the prowler might be. Besides, this mysterious stranger seemed to prefer humor to violence.

Yet, all the time they were eating and chattering—and Dick did his full share of both that young man, Prescott, was also busily thinking up plans by means of which he hoped to be able to gain a closer view of the recent prowler.

Of these plans he said no word to his chums, for there was more than a chance that the human mystery of the woods was even then within earshot, off under the shadows among the trees.

CHAPTER V

DICK GRAPPLES IN THE DARK

At last the meal was finished, this time without the help of the prowler. Dave and Dan washed the dishes, while Tom and Harry carried water enough to fill the hogshead that had been brought along as part of their camp equipment.

At the same time, Dick and Greg unstrapped and set up the six light-weight folding canvas cots, standing them in a row in the tent. Next they arranged the bedding that had been loaned by mothers at home, and made up the six beds. Enough fuel to start a fire in the morning was also brought in.

"And now, what did we come out here in the woods for?" inquired Dick smilingly.

“To get our fill of sleep,” yawned Tom.

“To eat,” suggested Hazelton hopefully.

“To fish,” added Dave Darrin promptly.

“Just to lie down and take things easy,” declared Danny Grin.

“As for me,” piped up Greg Holmes, “I’m not going to bother my head, to-night, as to why we came here. I’m going to get a ten hour nap, and in the morning I’ll try to solve the riddle for you, Dick, of why we came here.”

A tired lot of boys, not really ready, as yet, to admit that they were used up, lay down on their cots without undressing. They intended, later, to get into their pajamas.

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A single lantern, its wick turned low, hung from one of the posts. Prescott did not trust himself to lie down, for his eyes, despite his efforts to keep awake, were heavy, and he did not want to sleep for some time yet.

Within ten minutes Darrin alone had his eyes open, and even he was making a valiant struggle against sleep. At last, however, he yielded, and soon settled into sound slumber.

"They're off in another world," smiled Dick, as he listened to the deep breathing of his chums; then he slipped away from his cot.

From under a box in one corner of the tent he took out a large cup of coffee that he had hidden some time earlier. It was still warm and he drank it with relish, though his main purpose in using the beverage was to make sure of keeping himself awake.

His next move was to extinguish the lantern. Now he made his way to the bucket of water and basin. Dashing the cold water into his face, and wetting his eyes well with it, Prescott took a few deep breaths. He now felt equal to keeping awake for some time.

Outside, by this time, all was darkness, save where a few embers of the recent camp fire glowed dully.

Dick threw himself down, resting his head on his elbows, in the doorway of the tent.

"Now, don't you dare go to sleep!" he ordered himself, repeating the command frequently as a means of aiding himself to keep his eyelids from closing.

"You keep awake!" he half snorted, as he felt drowsiness getting nearer. He pinched himself, inflicting more than a little pain.

At last, however, the young leader of Dick & Co. found that his drowsiness had passed for the time being, like the sentinel in war time.

"Now, I think I can keep awake until daylight, if I have to," muttered young Prescott to himself. "At daylight it won't be so very mean to wake one of the other fellows and let him take my place."

Yet, after an hour had passed, Dick was almost doomed to discover that nature had some rights and knew how to assert them.

His eyes had just closed when he awoke with a start.

Someone was treading lightly past the wall of the tent, coming toward the door. Dick had barely time to glide back behind the flap of the tent when the unknown someone stopped at the doorway.

It was too dark to make out anything distinctly under the canvas, but the stranger listened to the combined snorings of five of the six boys, then chuckled softly.

“Oh! Funny, is it, to think that we’re all asleep, and that you may help yourself at will to the food that cost us so much money!” thought Dick wrathfully. The stranger hearing no sound from the apparently sleeping camp soon passed on in the direction of the fire.

Here much of the provisions had been stacked in the packing case cupboards, for the reason that to store food in the tent would seriously curtail the space that the boys wanted for comfort.

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Out of the tent crept Dick, crouching. His heart was beating a trifle faster than usual, perhaps, for he saw at once that the prowler was larger than himself.

Before one of the box cupboards the prowler halted and rummaged inside with his hands.

"I guess this is where I need a light," mused the stranger, half aloud.

"Pardon me, but what do you want with a light?" inquired Prescott, at the same time pushing the stranger forward on his face. Dick now seated himself on the other's shoulders.

"Don't make a fuss," Prescott advised. "I like to think myself a gentleman, and I don't want to muss you up too much."

The stranger laughed. It was an easy, confident laugh that destroyed a bit of the Gridley boy's sense of mastery.

"What are you doing, up at this time of night?" asked the stranger.

"Minding my own business, in my own camp," Dick replied easily. "And what are you doing here? Whose business are you minding?"

"My own, too, I reckon," replied the prowler more gruffly.

"In other words, attending to your hunger?" pressed Prescott.

"I'm looking out that I don't have too much hunger to-morrow," came the now half sullen answer.

"Is this the way you usually get your food?" Dick demanded dryly.

"This is the way I get most of it," came the reply.

"Stealing it, eh?"

"Well, what of it?" came the sulky retort. "The world owes me a living."

"To be sure it does," Dick answered blithely. "The world owes every man a living. That's just why you don't need to steal. Just sail in and collect that living by means of hard work. Are you the chap who collected our steaks this evening?"

"None of your business. And, now, if you've given me as much chatter as you want, get off my shoulders!"

"I've a little more to say to you yet," Dick responded.



“Get off my shoulders!”

“I will—when I’m through with you,” Dick agreed.

“You’ll get off at once, or I’ll roll you off!” came the now angry threat.

“Try it,” Dick urged coolly.

Right then and there the stranger did try it. He “heaved,” then attempted to roll and grapple with the young camper. He would have succeeded, too, had Prescott relied upon his strength alone. But Dick employed both hands in getting a neck-hold that hurt.

“Now, quit your fooling,” Prescott advised, “or I’ll let out a whoop that will bring five more fellows here. Do you know what they would do to you? They’d just about lynch you——schoolboy fashion. Do you know what a schoolboy lynching is?”

“No,” sullenly answered the stranger, as he started to renew the struggle.

“You will know, soon, if you don’t stop your stupid fooling,” Dick told him.

“Hang you, kid. Get off of me, and keep your hands away, or I’ll hurt you more than you were ever hurt in your life, and I’ll get away with it, too, before your friends come!”

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So lively did the struggle become that Dick was obliged to use his clenched fist against the side of the prowler's jaw. That quieted the stranger for an instant.

Leaping lightly from his troublesome captive, Dick snatched up a heavy club of firewood that lay nearby.

"That's right," Dick agreed, swinging the club, as the other rose to a sitting posture. "Sit up, but don't try to get up any farther unless you want to feel this stake, which is tougher than those other steaks!"

Prescott kept nimbly out of reach of the other's arms, though he took pains to keep himself where he could jump in with a handy blow at need.

"Now," remarked the high school boy, "you are getting an idea as to who's boss."

"Well, what do you want?" asked the other sullenly. He had already drawn down a tattered, battered old cap so that it screened his face.

"I want to get a better look at you," Prescott replied. "I want to be able to know you anywhere. Tan colored woollen shirt; brown corduroy trousers; low-cut black shoes; cap defies description. Now, let me see your face."

With that Dick bent quickly, picking up an oil-soaked bunch of faggots that he had prepared before the others had turned in for the night and dropped them upon the campfire.

Like a flash he was back, close to the stranger. "Don't you dare try to get up!" Dick threatened, swinging the club.

"Hit me, if you dare!" leered the other. "I'm going to get upright now!"

With that he made a lurching move forward. Prescott swung the club, though of course he did not intend to beat the stranger about the head.

His indecision left him off his guard. The stranger closed in on the club, wrenching it from Prescott's hand and tossing it far away. But Dick dropped, wrapping his arms about the other's legs and throwing him.

Just as the two went down in a crash the fire, which had been smoking, now blazed up.

"I'll show you!" roared the stranger, now thoroughly aroused, as he grappled with Prescott and the pair rolled in fierce embrace over the ground.

Dick was not afraid, but he didn't want this night hawk to get away, so he bellowed lustily:



“Fellows! Gridley! Gr-r-r-id-ley! Quick!”

“Stop that!” hissed the stranger, who was now easily uppermost, and holding Prescott with ease.

“Quick!” yelled Dick.

The stranger grasped the high school boy by the throat, then as swiftly changed his mind, for someone was stirring in the tent. Up leaped the prowler, yet, swift as he was, Dick was also on his feet.

“Keep back!” warned the prowler, as he turned to run.

“You’re mine—all mine!” vaunted young Prescott, making a gallant leap at the unknown foe.

But that brag was uttered just a few seconds too soon.

CHAPTER VI

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DANGER COMES ON THE HOOF

Smack!

Against Dick's face came the palm of the larger youth's right hand. It was the old, familiar trick of "pushing in his face." So quickly did that manoeuvre come that Dick, caught off his balance, was shoved backward until he tripped and fell.

Then the stranger vanished with the speed of one accustomed to flight through the woods.

His eyes full of sand from the fall, Dick struggled to his feet, rubbing his eyelids, just as Dave Darrin came running up.

"What was it?" demanded Dave.

"Come on! We ought to catch him yet!" cried young Prescott, turning and running into the woods. But Dick's eyes were not quite as keen as they had been, and Darry, once he had the general direction, outstripped his chum in the race.

Once away from the blazing fire of oil-soaked wood, however, the boys found themselves at a disadvantage in the woods. At last Darry stopped, listening. Then, hearing sounds, he wheeled, dashing at a figure.

"Get out with you, Darry!" laughed Prescott good-humoredly.

"I thought you were-----"

"The other fellow! Yes; I know," laughed Dick.

"Where is he? Listen!"

But only the night sounds of the woods answered them.

"We'd better put for camp," whispered Dick, "or that fellow will slip around us and pillage the supplies before we get there."

Dave started back at a dog trot, Dick following at a more leisurely gait. Both were soon by the campfire again.

"Was it the same fellow?" demanded Darry, in a low voice.

"It must have been," Dick nodded, "though you didn't see him at all when you encountered him, and I didn't get a view of his face. But he had on a tan colored shirt. He also had on brown corduroy trousers and low-cut black shoes. He kept his torn cap pulled down over his eyes so that I couldn't get a look at his face that would enable me to know it again if I saw it."

"Hang the fellow!" growled Darry. "Does he take us for a human meal ticket with six coupons?"

"He must be hungry," rejoined Dick, "when he could get away with all that steak and then come back, within a few hours, for more of our food."

"How did you come to catch him?" Dave asked curiously.

Prescott explained how he had managed to remain awake and on guard, against a possible second visit from the young prowler.

"So we've got to stay up the rest of the night, and mount guard every night, have we?" grunted Darry disgustedly. "Fine!"

"We'll either have to watch, or part with our food," Dick assented.

"We ought to have brought Harry Hazelton's bull-dog. That would have spared us guard duty."

"I'm glad we didn't bring the pup," Dick rejoined. "That pup is growing older, and crosser. He'd bite a pound or two out of some prowler's leg, and we don't want that to happen."

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"Why not?" demanded Dave grimly, opening his eyes very wide.

Dick laughed softly by way of answer.

"I'd just as soon have a tramp chewed up as have our food supplies vanish," Darry maintained.

"Little David, your temper has the upper hand of you at this moment," laughed Prescott.

"When that temper is on top you're dangerous—almost bloodthirsty. When your temper is in check you're as kind and gentle as any good-natured fellow. You wouldn't really want to see any human being mangled by a bull-pup's teeth."

"Well, maybe not mangled," Darry agreed. "But I don't believe Harry's pup would do any more than take hold—and keep hold."

"We won't have the pup, anyway," Dick replied, in a low voice.

"Why not?" Dave again demanded.

"Because, as you know well enough, Harry's father was afraid the pup would only get us into trouble by chewing up someone, and so declined to let us bring the dog."

"That was a shame," Dave insisted.

"I don't think so. If six of us can't take care of one stray tramp, not much larger than any of us, then we're too tender, and ought to be sleeping in little white cribs at home."

"Oh, stop that talk!" urged Dave.

"I mean what I said," Dick retorted. "We're big enough, and numerous enough, to guard our own camp."

"Of course we are; but we'll have to give up some sleep to accomplish that," Dave contended.

"Whoever loses sleep in the night time can make it up in the day time. And now, Darry, get to bed!"

"But we've got to remain on watch."

"You'll feel bad, in the morning, if deprived of your sleep. I'll stay up for a while yet, and then call Tom Reade."

"So I'm no good for guard duty, eh?" snorted Darry.

"Not a bit," said Dick cheerfully. "You're as sleepy and as cross as can be, right at this minute. Go and tuck in, Davy."

Darrin snorted again, then glared at Dick's placid face. Suddenly Dave broke into a hearty chuckle, slapping his chum on the back.

"You're all right, Dick," he declared. "You know how to keep your temper, talk smoothly, and yet hit harder than if you used a club. No, sirree! I'm not cross, even though I may be tired. I'm not cross, and I can thrash into subjection any fellow who dares hint that I'm cross, or that my temper is on a rampage. You go and turn in, Dick."

"Not yet."

"Then we'll both stay up and watch together."

"I'll tell you what," proposed Dick.

"Well?"

"Bring your cot out here. I'll let you sleep for an hour by my watch. Then I'll call you, and you hold the watch and let me sleep for an hour. There is no sense in both of us losing our rest at the same time. Yet, if either fellow needs the other, he'll have him right under his hand."

"All right," nodded Dave. "Anything, as long as I'm not accused of being a sleepy head."

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"A sleepy head?" Prescott repeated. "Why, when I called to you fellows for help you were the only one who responded. No; I wouldn't call you an incurable sleepy head, Darry."

Now wholly restored to good humor Dave went back into the tent, lifting his cot and bringing it out to within a few feet of the campfire.

"You take the first nap, Dick," begged Dave.

"No; you take it."

"But I'm not sleepy; honestly I'm not."

So Prescott lay down on the cot, closing his eyes.

The sunlight, streaming into his face, awakened him.

"Why—why—where's Darry?" thought Dick, sitting up straight.

The sound of deep breathing answered him. Dave sat with his back propped against a tree, sound asleep. He had slept for hours, evidently, having fallen asleep through sheer, uncontrollable drowsiness.

Rising from the cot Dick stretched himself for he was still drowsy. Then he tip-toed over to where the food was stored, peering in.

"I can't see that our friend, the enemy, has been here again," Dick smiled. He glanced at Darry, but did not awake that tired youngster.

As noiselessly as he could Prescott busied himself with starting a small campfire that could be made larger when needed. This done, he set water to boil.

"Ho-hum!" yawned Tom Reade, dressed only in underclothes and trousers, as he stood in the tent doorway half an hour later.

Dick placed his fingers to his lips, whispering:

"Don't rouse the other fellows. They're tired."

"Darry certainly looks tired," smiled Tom, regarding Dave in the uncomfortable posture by the tree.

Yet, though he must have been quite uncomfortable had he been awake, Darry slumbered on. Greg came out, looked at Dave and smiled. Then Hazelton, next Dalzell, came outside.

"What is the cot doing out here?" Danny Grin was the first to inquire.

"We had a visit from the prowler in the night," Dick replied, "and Dave and I stayed on guard."

"Was Darry as efficient all through the guard tour as he is just now?" demanded Reade ironically.

"That's all right for you fellows," retorted Dick, "who even slept right past my call for help. Let Dave alone. Let him finish his nap, no matter how long he sleeps."

But at that moment Darrin opened his eyes, then leaped to his feet, a victim of red-faced confusion.

"What are all you fellows laughing at?" Dave demanded.

So far none had done more than grin, but now a very general roar went up.

"I'm a chump, on guard duty, and I admit it," Darrin went on, looking sheepish. "Dick, when you found me asleep why didn't you call me?"

"Because," Prescott answered, "when you went to sleep I judged that you did so because you needed the rest."

"I must have been sound asleep from at least one o'clock in the morning," Dave went on ruefully. "Oh, I am a fellow to be trusted, I am!"

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"If you've been sleeping, with your back against that tree, from one in the morning, you must be as stiff and lame as you could possibly be," Reade suggested.

"I am pretty lame," Darrin confessed.

"Are you fellows ever going to hustle about and make some moves toward getting breakfast?" inquired young Prescott.

"What have you been doing in that line?" Danny Grin wanted to know.

For answer Dick Prescott pointed to the merrily blazing campfire and the steaming kettle of water.

"I am ready to do a lot more, too," Dick added, "as soon as the rest of you will show signs of life."

At that there was a general bustling.

"Why didn't you wake me up in time to save me from all the joshing?" Darry demanded, with a note of reproach in his voice, as soon as he got a chance to speak with Dick alone. "Tom Reade won't be through all summer with tormenting me about being asleep at the switch."

"No one would have known anything about it, if you hadn't given it away yourself, both by look and words," Prescott returned. "I hadn't said a word that enlightened anyone."

Breakfast was soon ready, for hungry boys, in the woods, are always ready to eat.

While the meal was being disposed of Prescott told his chums of the visit during the night, and of his own share and Dave's in trying to nab the tantalizing prowler.

"How many such regiments of guards as Darry, would it take to guard this camp properly at night?" asked Tom dryly.

"It seems to me," Prescott remarked, "that you fellows will do very well to sing mighty low about Dave's drowsiness. When I had to call for help last night he was the only one with an ear quick enough to hear me and come to my support. What was the matter with the rest of you, sleepy heads, or did you hear and feel that it might be dangerous to turn out in the middle of the night?"

That last taunt had the desired effect. Darrin was allowed to eat his breakfast in peace.

After the meal was over the boys sat around the camp for a few minutes. Each hated to be the first to make a move toward the drudgery of dish-washing and camp cleaning.

"After we get things to rights," inquired Reade, "what is to be the programme for the day?"

"There's a pond east of us that is said to hold perch," Dave answered. "I'm going to take fishing tackle and go in search of a mess of fish. Anyone going with me?"

"I will," offered Danny Grin.

"As for me," spoke up Tom, "I have a line on a place where blueberries grow in profusion. Harry, will you go along with me and pick berries?"

"If it isn't over five miles away," Hazelton assented cautiously.

"Then what are we going to do!" asked Greg Holmes, turning to Prescott.

"From the plans we've heard laid down," smiled Dick, "I think we will have to stay right here and keep the prowler from dropping in to carry away the rest of our provisions."

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"Bother such sport as that!" snorted Greg.

"Humph! It may turn out to be the liveliest sport of all," declared Dick dryly. "Certainly if that fellow turns up it will take two of us to handle him with comfort. He's a tough customer."

"Dan, you always were an artist with a shovel," suggested Darry insinuatingly. "Suppose you get out the spade and see what sort of perch bait you can turn up in this neighborhood."

"Me?" drawled Dalzell protestingly. "Shucks! I'm no good at finding bait. Never was."

"Get the spade and try," ordered Darry. "If you don't find some bait we'll have to put off fishing until some other day."

That brought Dan to terms. He shouldered a spade, picked up an empty vegetable can and started away, while Dave began to sort tackle and to rig on hooks suitable for catching perch. Tom and Harry started in to unpack supplies from a pair of six-quart pails that they needed for the morning's work.

"Say, hear that, fellows!" demanded Tom, straightening up suddenly.

From the distance to the northward came a dull rumbling sound.

"Thunder?" suggested Danny Grin, glancing wonderingly up at the clear sky.

"If there's a storm coming it will upset a day's berrying," Reade announced.

"Fellows," Dick broke in, "it's a rumbling, yet it doesn't sound just like thunder, either. It sounds more like-----"

"Cavalry on a gallop," suggested Greg.

"Just what it does sound a lot like," Prescott nodded. Then he dropped to the ground, holding one ear close to the earth.

"And, whatever the rumble may be," Prescott went on, "it travels along the ground. Just get your ears down, fellows."

"It's something big, and it's moving this way," cried Dave.

"It can't be cavalry," Tom argued. "There are no manoeuvres on; there is no state camp ever held in this part of the state, either. What do you-----"

But Dick Prescott was up on his feet by this time. Furthermore, he was running. He stopped at the base of the trunk of the first tall tree. Up he went with much of the speed of a squirrel. Higher and higher he made his way among the branches.

“Say, be careful there, Dick!” called Tom Reade, warningly. “If you get a tumble-----”

“I’m not a booby, I hope,” Dick called down, as he went to still loftier heights. He was now among the slender uppermost branches, where a boy would need to be a fine climber in order to make such swift progress. Even Dick Prescott might readily enough snap a branch now, and come tumbling to earth.

“Stop!” warned Tom. “If you don’t you’ll butt your head into a cloud, the first thing you know.”

“Can you see anything?” called Danny Grin.

“I see quite a cloud of dust to the northward.”

“How far off?” asked Dave.

“About a mile, I should say, and it’s headed this way, coming closer every minute.”

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"What's behind the cloud? Can you make out?" Greg bawled up.

"I'm trying to see," Dick replied. "There, I got a glimpse then. It's some kind of animals, heading for this camp at a gallop."

"It can't be cavalry," shouted Reade. "You don't see any men, do you?"

"No," Prescott called down, shielding his eyes with one hand. "Say, fellows!"

"Have you guessed what it is?" demanded Harry Hazelton.

"I know what it is—now!" Dick answered. Then he began to descend the tree with great speed.

"Careful, there!" shouted Tom Reade. "That isn't a low baluster you're sliding down."

"Keep quiet, until I reach the ground," gasped Dick. As he came nearer those below saw that he looked truly startled.

Then Dick reached the low branches, and began to look for a chance to jump.

"We've got to get out of here, fellows!" he called. "You know the trick that cattle—owners have in this part of the county of turning their cattle out to graze in one bunch. That bunch is headed this way—hundreds strong, and it's going to rush through this camp, trampling everything in the way!"

CHAPTER VII

FIGHTING THE MAD STAMPEDE

"Nothing doing, and don't get excited," replied Tom Reade, shaking his head.

"There will be a lot doing in three or four minutes," Prescott retorted excitedly. "The cattle are stampeded, and they'll sweep through here like a cyclone."

"The trees will break up the stampede," Tom insisted coolly.

"Not much they won't," Dick answered. "The cattle are headed along a natural lane, where the trees are less thick than in other parts of the forest."

"The trees will stop 'em before they get here," Reade insisted.

"The trees will do nothing of the sort," uttered Dick, glancing swiftly about him. "The cattle are among the trees already. Just hear that rumble. And it's a lot closer now."

"I reckon we'd better move, do it now, and do it fast," cried Hazelton, who knew that Dick's judgment was generally the best.

"And leave our camp to be trampled down and made a complete wreck by a lot of crazy cattle?" gasped Greg Holmes.

"I'd rather have the camp trampled than my face," retorted Dalzell.

"I don't want to flee from here and leave the camp to be destroyed, and our summer's fun spoiled," protested Greg. "We must stop the cattle, or split their stampede."

"All right, Holmesy," agreed Tom ironically. "I appoint you to do my full share in stopping a stampede of cattle." Reade's face had suddenly grown very grave as he now realized that the trees were not stopping the frenzied cattle.

Dick, who had been thinking, suddenly wheeled, making a break for the supplies.

"Get a box of matches, each one of you!" he shouted. "Then sprint with me for that patch of sun-baked grass just north of us."

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"What's the idea?" Dave asked, but Dick was already running fast.

"Get your matches and come on!" Dick called back over his shoulder.

As speedily as could be done the others followed suit. Dick reached the sun-burned strip of grass, whose nearer edge was some two hundred yards north of camp.

"Hey! He's starting a forest fire!" gasped Dan Dalzell, as he caught sight of young Prescott bending over the dried, yellowish grass.

"Scatter, all along the strip!" shouted Prescott, rising as soon as he had ignited a clump of grass. "Get this whole strip of burned grass blazing. It's the only chance to save the camp—or ourselves!"

Dalzell shivered. Nor could Dan understand how such a course would serve to save their camp. But he saw the others following their leader's orders.

"Get over the ground, Dan!" bellowed Dick, as he sprinted to another point. "Start a lot of blazes!"

So Danny Grin fell in line with the movements of the others, though he felt not a little doubt as to the wisdom of the course.

Flame was now spurting up over more than an acre of the sun-baked strip of grass.

"Get a lot more of the grass going, fellows!" panted Dick, who was working like a beaver and dripping with perspiration. "It's our only hope. Hustle!"

With the flames arose a dense cloud of smoke. As the wind was from the southwest the smoke was in the faces of the onrushing cattle.

"There! We've done all we can!" bellowed Dick, running down the line formed by his chums. "Now, get back out of this roasting furnace."

Close to the edge of the burning strip of grass the six high school boys now stood side by side gazing at their work.

"We'd better scoot!" counseled Danny Grin.

"Where can we go?" Dick shouted, in order to make himself heard over the crackling flames and the greater noise of the pounding hoofs. "If we're not safe behind a curtain of flame, there is no other place near where we'd be safer."

Danny Grin turned to bolt, but Darry reached out, catching him by the collar and throwing him to the ground.

“Don’t be a fool, Danny, and don’t be panic stricken,” Darrin advised. “We’re safer here, at least, than we can be anywhere else within a quarter of a mile.”

The bellow of a bull through the forest—a bellow taken up by other bulls—made all of the boys quake in their shoes. But none of the lads ran away.

Gazing between the trees they soon made out a stirring sight.

On came the stampede, cattle packed so tightly that any animal falling could only be trampled to death by those behind.

“My, but that’s a grand sight!” cried Tom Reade.

Not one of the six boys but longed to take to his heels. To them it seemed absolutely impossible for the cattle to turn aside as they must dash on through the blazing grass, such was the pressure from behind. Yet not one of Dick & Co. turned to run.

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Suddenly three of the bulls went down to their knees, snorting and bellowing furiously. Half a dozen cows held back from the flames, only to be trampled and killed.

Somehow, the powerful bulls staggered to their feet, then broke to one side.

A dozen more cows plunged on into the blazing grass, then sank, overcome by the heat.

It seemed like a miracle as, following the bulls, the herd split, some going east, others west, and carrying the swerving cattle after them in two frantic streams.

In some way that the boys could not understand, the pressure of cattle from the rear accommodated itself to the movement of the forepart of the herd. The herd divided now swept on rapidly, going nearly east and west in two sections.

Not until some six hundred crazy cattle had passed out of view did the boys feel like speaking. Indeed, they felt weak from the realization of the peril they had so narrowly escaped.

"I think, fellows," proposed Dave Darrin huskily at last, "that we owe a whopping big vote of thanks to good old Dick Prescott!"

"After we pass that vote," proposed Hazelton, "we'd better make all haste to get out of these woods before the owner of this stretch of forest comes along to nab the fellows who set his timber afire."

"Do you see any trees ablaze?" Dick demanded.

Now, for the first time, two or three of the fellows began to realize the value of Dick's idea. The sun-burned grass, some three acres in extent, was a clearing devoid of trees. Here the July heat had baked the turf. On all sides, under the trees beyond, the grass was still green. Any boy who has ever been in the country knows that green grass won't burn. Hence the blaze was limited to a small area. A few trees whose trunks were near the edge of the clearing were smoking slightly, but no damage was done to the timber. There was really no work to be done in extinguishing this fire, which, furious while it lasted, was now dying out.

"Let's get back and see how our camp fared," proposed Hazelton.

"We don't have to," Dick replied. "We saw the directions taken by the cattle, and they didn't go anywhere near our camp. Let's wait, and, as soon as the ground is cool enough, let's get out to the injured cows, and see if we can help any of them."

Hardly had Dick spoken when one of the cows, right at the edge of the blackened clearing, rose clumsily, then moved slowly northward. Presently another cow followed suit.

"We can get over the ground now," said Dick. "Let's go out and look at these animals."

They counted eight dead cows, their unwieldy carcasses lying motionless on the burned grass.

"Probably killed by the hot air that they drew into their lungs," commented Tom Reade.

"We killed the poor beasts," said Danny Grin, with a catch in his breath.

"Perhaps we did," Dick admitted. "But we had to do something. Anyhow, we broke the force of the stampede, and, if that hadn't been checked, a still greater number of cows would have been killed. They would have fallen, exhausted, and then they would have been trampled on and killed by the plunging cattle behind them."

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"That's true enough," nodded Tom. "Even if we did kill a few, I guess we're more entitled to praise than reproach."

Two more cows presently got up and limped away, but there were four others still alive, yet too badly hurt to attend to themselves.

Nor could the high school boys help, further than by carrying buckets of water to the suffering animals. Dick & Co. had no firearms along, and could not put the injured cows out of their misery.

"Now, let's get out of here," urged Dick at last. "We can't do any good here, and this is no pleasant sight to gaze upon."

"It seems too bad to leave all this prime roast beef on the ground, doesn't it?" hinted Tom. "And we fellows have such good appetites."

"The cattle are not ours," Dick rejoined. "We have no right to help ourselves to any cuts of meat from the dead animals."

So they returned to the camp, which they found, of course, quite undisturbed.

It so happened that the four members of the party who had proposed going to other scenes for the forenoon forgot their projects.

CHAPTER VIII

VISITORS FOR THE FEAST

Bang! bang! sounded in the direction of the burned-over clearing.

"Let's go over and see what that means," proposed Tom.

He jumped up, ready to sprint over to the clearing.

"If you want advice," Dick offered, "I'd say to wait until the shooting is over. You might stop a stray bullet not intended for us."

"But what can the shooting mean" wondered Greg.

"When anyone is turning bullets loose," remarked Darry, "I'm not too inquisitive."

So the boys waited until the firing had ceased. Then they heard what sounded like the noise of a horse moving through the brush.

"Hello, there!" called Dick.

"Hello, yourself!" came the answer, and a mounted man rode into view. He did not look especially ugly or dangerous; his garb was plainly intended for the saddle. As he came into sight the man slipped a heavy automatic revolver into a saddle holster.

"What was up?" inquired Dick, rising and going forward to meet the newcomer.

"Stampede," replied the other briefly.

"We know something about that," Dick rejoined.

"Do you know anything about the burning of the clearing?" asked the horseman, reining up and eyeing the lads keenly.

"Yes, sir; we fired the grass," Prescott acknowledged.

"To break the stampede?"

"No, sir; to save our camp, which would have been destroyed."

"Shake," invited the stranger, riding forward and bending over to hold out his hand.

"Your fire cost us a few cattle, but I reckon it saved the destruction of a lot more, for there would have been many of 'em killed if they had charged on into the deeper forest."

"Then the stampede has been stopped?" asked Prescott.

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"Yes; two of my men followed the parted trails, and came back to report the two herds halted and grazing. My name is Ross. I'm the owner of about a fourth of the cattle in the big herd."

"I hope you don't feel angry with us for doing the best we could to save our camp," Dick went on.

"You saved myself and the other owners a greater loss," replied Mr. Ross, "so I thank you."

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Ross," smiled Tom Reade. "But what was the shooting about?"

"I shot some of the cattle that appeared to be still alive, to put an end to their suffering. You boys haven't any ice here, have you?"

"No, sir," Dick replied.

"Too bad," said Mr. Ross. "If you had ice I could offer you a prime lot of beef that it will hardly pay me to move, as I can't get the animals cut up quickly enough and on ice, after the long haul I would have to make."

"Are you going to leave the cattle on the clearing?" Dick asked in sudden concern.

"We'll bury the carcasses," smiled Mr. Ross. "If we didn't the smell would soon force you boys to move your camp a mile or two. But see here! Ever have a barbecue?"

"No, sir," Dick made answer, his voice betraying sudden interest.

"Would you like one?" went on the owner. "A barbecue, real western style, with a whole cow on the fire?"

"It would be great!" answered nearly all of Dick & Co. in concert.

"Then we'll have one, as soon as I can call my men in," replied Mr. Ross cheerfully. "I'm bound to get some good out of the dead cattle."

"We'll want a lot of firewood for that, won't we?" asked Dick, his eyes gleaming.

"More than a little," nodded Mr. Ross. "And big wood, at that."

"Dave, you and Tom had better take the axes and get some real wood," Prescott called. "Harry and Dan will help you and bring it in. Where shall we put the wood, Mr. Ross?"



"In the middle of the burnt clearing will be better," replied the cattle owner. "Then the fire won't have a chance to spread in any direction. Besides, you won't want the heat of a great fire too close to your camp. After the meat is cooked we can bring it over here. Have you boys plenty of canned vegetables and the like?"

"Plenty, sir," Dick answered cheerily, though his heart sank a trifle as he thought of how the cattle owner and his helpers might clean out their stock.

Dick and Greg busied themselves with carrying over to the clearing such things as Mr. Ross said that they would need. Then it was decided that the vegetables should be cooked at the camp.

"Let me see your stock of provisions and perhaps I may get another idea," proposed the cattle owner. "I see that you have flour, and oh, yes; you have all that will be needed for a pudding, and one of my men knows how to make one of the best boiled puddings you ever ate out under the sky."

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Drawing a small horn from one of his side pockets, Mr. Ross blew a long, shrill blast.

"Jim will come in as soon as possible, after hearing that sound," smiled the cattle owner.

Jim Hornby rode in within five minutes. He was a lean, long, roughened and reddened farm laborer, but when told that a boiled pudding was wanted he walked straight to the place where the supplies were kept.

"Everything here but berries," Jim explained. "Any of you boys know where to get some blueberries?"

Greg knew, and promptly departed with a pail.

Crackle! Crackle! Two brisk fires were now going in the burnt clearing, started by Dick at Mr. Ross' direction. By this time Mr. Ross' other helper had come in, reporting that the cattle were quiet and grazing, and now this helper and his employer began to remove the hide from one of the cows.

"This cow was overcome by smoke and hot air as soon as it rushed into the blaze," explained Mr. Ross. "Therefore, this will be safe meat to eat. When an animal, however, dies in pain, after much suffering, its flesh should never be used for food. Bill, now that we've gotten the hide off you mount and ride back to the wagon. Bring it along."

Dan and Harry were still bringing in heavy firewood and stacking it up, while the ring of axes in the hands of Dave and Tom was heard. It was a busy scene.

"Prescott, you'd better begin piling on the big wood now," suggested Mr. Ross, after noting the sun's position.

Things moved rapidly along.

"You might as well halt your wood cutters, unless you want their product for your own camp," suggested the cattle owner, and Prescott sent the word to stop chopping.

Within twenty minutes the big wagon, drawn by a pair of mules, came up with Bill Hopple driving and his horse tied to the tailboard.

With a speed and skill born of long practice, Mr. Ross began to cut up the carcass of the cow. Bill was busy making greenwood spits and arranging them over the two fires, Dan and Harry helping him.

Almost at a dead run came Greg Holmes through the woods, with two quarts of blueberries. Over at the camp, as soon as he saw the berries, Jim Hornby began

mixing his pudding batter. He had already prepared his fire and had found a suitable kettle.

From watching the pudding game, Tom strolled through to the two fires in the clearing.

"This begins to look like a fine chance to eat," sighed Tom full of contentment.

"Doing anything, Reade?" inquired the cattle owner, who had quickly learned all their names.

"No, sir."

"Then suppose you take this heart of the cow over to your camp. Put it on the fire in a kettle of salted water, and let it boil slowly. By that means you will be able to serve up the heart for your evening meal."

"Is there no end to this cow?" gasped Tom.

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"Well, a good-sized cow provides several hundred pounds of meat," replied Mr. Ross. "Oh, what a shame that you boys have no ice, and no way of getting it or keeping it! I could fix you for a month's supply of meat!"

"Dick, do you remember what we came out here in the woods for?" queried Tom.

"To camp, and have a good time," Prescott laughed. "And, so far, we win. We're having a bully time!"

"What else did we come out here for?"

"To harden and train ourselves so that we can make a hard try for the Gridley High School football eleven this fall."

"Will a week of training table undo the harm of to-day's big feasts?" groaned Reade.

"No fellow is obliged to make a glutton of himself," retorted Dick.

"Maybe not," quoth Tom, "but everyone of us will be sorely tempted. You ought to see that pudding that Jim Hornby is putting up."

"Young man, are you going to get that heart to cooking before it goes bad in the sun?" asked Mr. Ross sharply.

Tom meekly turned and started toward camp.

"What's Greg doing?" Dick called after him.

"Holmesy is watching, learning the way Jim Hornby puts up a boiled pudding," Reade called back.

Honk! honk! sounded an automobile horn from the rough trail of a roadway an eighth of a mile away. The honking continued until Dick, realizing that it was a signal, gave a loud halloo.

"Is that Prescott's camp?" called a voice.

"It's the camp of Prescott and his friends," Dick shouted back.

"Get ready for visitors, then!" called the voice again, and this time Dick recognized the voice as that of Dr. Bentley.

"We won't eat you out of supplies, though," called the doctor, now heading through the forest. "We're bringing with us our own cold lunch."



"Cold lunch!" Dick chuckled back. "You won't be able to eat it after you see what we have!"

Through the trees now the fluttering of skirts could be seen. High school girls were on their way to share the barbecue, though as yet they did not know of the treat in store for them.

CHAPTER IX

DICK'S WOODLAND DISCOVERY

"You couldn't have come at a finer time!" cried Dick joyously, as he raced to meet the most welcome visitors.

"We're barbecuing a whole cow."

"Then I trust, Prescott, that you came honestly by the cow," rejoined Dr. Bentley his eyes twinkling.

Besides Dr. and Mrs. Bentley, there were eight girls. The visitors quickly explained that, besides the Bentley touring car, that of the Sharps was being used on this expedition, Susie Sharp being one of the girls of the party. The Sharps did not employ a chauffeur, but their general man knew how to run the car, and he was now engaged in taking the cars to a spot well off the road.

"I'll send one of the fellows to get him," Dick promised, as he led the numerous though welcome guests to camp.

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"Lucky I made a special big pudding," grinned Jim Hornby.

"The girls may have my share," gallantly offered Tom Reade, though he groaned under his breath.

"There's pudding enough for a lot more people than we have here," returned Jim. "I don't bother making small puddings."

The boys were all called in quickly to greet the girls and Dr. and Mrs. Bentley. Of course, the girls had to see the interior of the tent, and all the arrangements of the camp.

"I wish I were a boy," sighed Laura Bentley enviously.

"I'm glad you're not," spoke Dick gallantly. "You're ever so much nicer as a girl."

Honk! honk! sounded over by the road. The noise continued.

"Greg," said Dick, "that's Miss Sharp's father's man. Evidently he wants something. You'd better run over."

In less than five minutes back came Greg with three other men, all of them unexpected. Mr. Alonzo Hibbert, minus his four-quart hat, and wearing a flat straw hat instead, as well as light clothes and silk negligee shirt, came in advance of Tom Colquitt, the man from Blinders' detective agency. Still to the rear of them was a third man, slightly bent and looking somewhat old, though there were no gray streaks in his light brown hair.

"How do you do, boys?" called Mr. Hibbert airily, as he came swiftly forward. "We saw a big smoke over this way, and so we stopped to find out what was the matter. Young Holmes has asked us to stop for your barbecue, but it looks to me like a terrible imposition on you, and so-----"

Here Mr. Hibbert paused, looking highly embarrassed as he caught sight of Mrs. Bentley and the girls coming out of the tent.

"You already have other company," murmured Hibbert apologetically. "No; most decidedly we must not intrude on you."

"How do you do, Mr. Colquitt?" was Dr. Bentley's greeting. Then other introductions followed, and, ere he knew it, Hibbert and his friends were members of the party and destined to partake of the barbecue feast.

The oldish-looking man with the new arrivals proved to be Mr. Calvin Page.



"He's the millionaire father of the missing boy that Colquitt and I are trying to find," Hibbert explained to Dick.

"Have you any clue, as yet?" Prescott inquired.

"Nothing worth while," sighed Lon Hibbert.

"It's too bad," murmured Dick. "Mr. Page is a fine-looking man, but he must be lonely."

"He is," agreed Lon Hibbert.

"His wife is dead, isn't she?"

"Yes; and Page would give the world to find that boy of his."

"Perhaps if he doesn't find his son it may be as well," Dick hinted.

"Why, as well?"

"The missing son, brought up by others, might have turned out badly," Prescott suggested.

"Pooh!" quickly rejoined Lon Hibbert. "That missing son, no matter how wild or bad he may be, is still young enough to reform. Prescott, no matter how bad that son may be, it will be a blessing for my friend Page to find his boy! I pray that it may be my good fortune to run across that son, one of these days, and that I may be the first to recognize the boy."

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"Prescott," broke in Mr. Ross, coming forward, "you don't begin to have enough knives, forks and plates to take care of this crowd, do you?"

"I'm sorry to say that we haven't," Dick smiled. "But we'll manage that all right. My friends and I will play waiters, and sit at second table after the dishes have been washed."

"You won't have to," replied the cattle owner. "I have a folding table and dishes in my wagon, and I'll send Bill Hopple after 'em."

So the tables were set under the shade of the trees, not far from the campfire. The Sharps man came up, and was seated with Jim and Bill. Everything being now cooked, the feast began.

"I've never had anything as wonderful as this happen to me before," cried Belle Meade, as she seated herself and looked over the two tables with sparkling eyes. "Girls, we didn't look forward to such a treat as this when we left Gridley this morning."

"You intended to look in on us, didn't you?" inquired Darry.

"Yes; but we brought our own luncheons," said Laura. "We didn't expect you to do anything for us—unless you boys had happened to catch a mess of fish."

"We were planning to go fishing this morning," Tom Reade explained, "although we do not know whether the fishing near here amounts to much. May I pass you some of this sirloin, Miss Marshall?"

Gay spirits ruled, as they usually do and always should when young people are together out in the open, far from studies or from any of the other cares of life.

Dick told the story of the stampede, while Mr. Ross added much about the peculiarities of stampeding cattle and the impossibility of controlling the animals while their mad fright lasts.

"I am certain that this is the finest meal I have ever eaten," declared Mr. Page, who, up to the present, had been rather silent.

"There is only one thing it needs," rejoined Mr. Ross. "If we had about six roasted ears of corn for each diner then this barbecue would be a huge success."

"Not even the corn could improve it," declared Laura Bentley, as Dick helped her to more of the roasted meat.

"Don't forget that pudding, ladies and gentlemen!" called out Jim Hornby, from where he sat. "That pudding is my best kind, and the best one of its kind that I ever turned out."

When you have the pudding you won't be thinking of a little thing like roasted ears of corn."

"No more, thank you," replied Clara Marshall, as Greg tried to secure her plate in order to help her to more food.

"Until the pudding comes on," prompted Jim Hornby.

"Until the pudding arrives," smiled Clara.

"But no one may think of having pudding yet," insisted Mr. Ross, with mock gravity. "I forbid that anyone should have pudding, or even think of it, until we have tried the one really delicious dish of this feast."

"And what may that be?" called Dr. Bentley.

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"The best part of the cow," replied Mr. Ross.

"A big rib roast, served with cracked bones with the marrow cooked in them. Come along, Bill. We'll bring back the roast and the marrow."

Ross and his man moved briskly out of sight. Only a few moments had passed when Mr. Ross' voice was heard from the clearing:

"*Thieves!* The rib roast is gone—so is the marrow!"

Dick glanced swiftly at his chums. The same idea was in the minds of all the members of Dick & Co.

"Our friend, the prowler, has been here," muttered Prescott, rising hastily. "This thing has got to be stopped. Come along, fellows! Friends, please excuse us for a few moments."

At a dog trot Dick led the way to the clearing. There stood Mr. Ross, looking the picture of indignation.

"I didn't know there were tramps in these woods," muttered the cattle owner.

"Tramp, thief, or whatever he is," exclaimed Dick Prescott, "that fellow must move on out of this part of the country. If he doesn't we'll catch him. After we get through with him, he'll be glad enough to move on."

"If he's able," added Dave Darrin significantly.

"Oh, what's the use of making a fuss, this time?" demanded Tom Reade good-humoredly. "For once we have so much meat that we could spare a hungry man two hundred pounds and not miss it."

"It's the principle of the thing," muttered Dick, who was studying the ground intently.

"That big, hulking fellow doesn't care a rap whether we have plenty, or whether he takes all we have. We've got to suppress him. We must catch him, and put a stop to his thieving. See! Here's where he went off through the woods. Come on! We'll trail him!"

"And, if we find him?" asked Greg.

"We'll try to reason with the fellow," responded Prescott rather grimly.

Just as the boys started off on the trail that Prescott had discovered, other figures appeared on the scene.

"Now, may I ask what you girls are doing here?" asked Tom, his tone more agreeable than his words.

"We want to see the fun, whatever is going to happen," declared Susie Sharp.

"Oh, there will be plenty of that, I promise you, if we can find the fellow," asserted Darry bluntly.

"Come along, girls!" cried Belle Meade gleefully.

"But there may be something disagreeable happen, you know, girls," Dick warned them. "If we overtake this fellow there may be a fight."

"If you could call it a fight, when six Gridley high school boys attack one man, then I shall have to change my mind about our high school boys," hinted Laura Bentley teasingly.

It was plain enough that the girls were bent on following them, so no more objections were raised.

"We'll travel so fast that the girls won't be able to keep up," whispered Tom Reade to Dick. "We'll lose 'em, and they'll be glad to hike back to the table."

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This, however, proved to be not quite as easy as had been expected. The trail into the woods was rather a plain one, though it could not be followed at a run.

"Keep behind me, fellows," urged Dick. "If you keep up with me you may blot out the trail."

So his five chums came after him, with the girls in the rear, in a straggling line.

Into the deepest woods the trail led. "The girls will soon tire of this chase, and face about," Tom told Darry.

Which was precisely what happened.

In the deepest part of the woods Dick parted a tangle of bushes through which the trail led. Then, in a voice vibrant with agitation, he shouted:

"Come on, fellows! Quick!"

CHAPTER X

SETTING A NEW TRAP

What Dick had caught sight of, and what had made him call to his chums was the figure of the camp prowler partially dressed seated on the edge of a pool of water fed by a forest brook where evidently he had been bathing.

He had heard Dick's cry, however. These few instants of time had been enough for the bather to jump up, snatch up the remainder of his clothes and set off through the woods with the speed of an antelope.

"Come on!" cheered Dick Prescott. "Full speed! We'll catch him. He hasn't his shoes on, and his bare feet will soon go lame on the twigs and stones that he'll step on in running. He can't go far before we nab him."

"Spread out, fellows!" called Tom Reade. "Don't let the rascal slip through our line. Dick, did you get a good look at him?"

"A fine peep," Prescott affirmed.

"Was he the thief?" Dave demanded.

"The very fellow!" Dick called back, for he was still in the lead.

"Don't talk any more," Reade warned his friends cautiously. "We'll use up our wind."

As he ran Dick had an important secret on his mind. This was not quite the time to impart it to his chums, however, so he held his peace and did his best to save his wind.

Thus half a mile, at least, was quickly traversed. By this time the high school boys, running as they had done, began to feel winded.

"I can't go any further," gasped Hazelton, halting and leaning against a tree.

"I'm in the same fix," muttered Danny Grin. as he, too, came to a stop.

Reade, Darrin and Prescott ran on some distance farther, but at last Dick called a brief signal for a halt.

"Where are you, friend?" bawled Dick, using his last wind in one resolute vocal effort.

"Friend!" scoffed Reade.

"Of course the fellow will call and tell us where he is!" jeered Darry.

"We won't hurt you—won't try to," Dick promised solemnly, again sending his voice as far as he could make it travel. "All we want to do is to talk to you—and we're friends honestly!"

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"Say, what are you trying to give that thief?" protested Tom, in an indignant undertone.

"Why are you telling him we're friends, and won't hurt him?" insisted Dave Darrin.

"Because I mean just what I say," retorted Prescott, so crisply that, for the moment, no one pressed him with any more questions.

Dick continued his calls, but received no response.

"By this time that fellow's a mile from here, and still running," mocked Dave.

"Or else he doubled on us, somewhere, and is hidden where he can watch us, and laugh at us slyly," suggested Tom, as the three high school boys turned to walk back to camp.

"If he's hiding on our trail, the thief had better not let me catch him laughing at us!" growled Darry indignantly.

"Now, see here, both of you," Dick Prescott went on, earnestly. "If we come across that fellow, don't either of you make a grab at him. Just let me handle him—and I'll do it by talking alone. We mustn't use our fists."

"You've changed your tune wonderfully within the last few minutes," muttered Dave.

"If I have," Dick answered impressively, "it's because I know something now that I didn't know a little while ago."

"And what's that?" asked Tom eagerly.

"I'll tell all hands presently," Dick answered mysteriously.

"Oh, fudge!" growled Darry, under his breath, for he was fully as curious as Tom Reade had been.

But Dick walked on as briskly as his almost winded condition would permit. So they returned to the place where Harry and Dan awaited them. To these two Dick repeated his instructions in the unlikely case of their meeting the thief during their walk back to camp.

Nothing was seen of the fugitive, however, and the boys picked up Greg Holmes close to the little swimming pool.

"I knew I could not catch up with you fellows," explained Holmes, "so I took the girls back to camp and then put in my time prowling about here and trying to locate the marrow bones that the sneak stole."

"Dick doesn't want us to hurt the fellow, if we run across him," said Dave grimly.

"Why not?" asked Greg, opening his eyes very wide.

"I don't know," sighed Dave. "Ask Dick."

"I'll tell you all by and by," smiled Dick. "But now, let us hurry back to camp. I want to see Mr. Colquitt just as soon as I can."

"Bosh! A detective like Colquitt doesn't take up with such trifling mysteries as missing marrow bones," jibed Reade. "Besides, we can't afford to hire detectives."

"I don't want to hire a detective," Dick replied enigmatically, "but I'd like about one minute's talk with Mr. Colquitt, and I mean to have it. Don't let us dawdle on the way back, fellows."

So the six boys hurried on and soon came within sight of the camp.

"There they come!" cried Belle Meade. "Did you get the thief, boys?"

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"No," called Dave, "and it seems that the fellow is no longer a thief, but a distinguished fellow citizen whom we must honor at sight, like a bank draft."

"What are you talking about?" half frowned Belle.

"I haven't the least idea what I am talking about," Dave admitted cheerfully. "You'll have to ask Dick for the map to my few remarks."

"Where are Mr. Colquitt and his party?" Dick demanded.

"Gone," replied Laura Bentley.

"How long ago?" Dick asked, paling somewhat and looking troubled.

"About two minutes ago," replied Dr. Bentley. "They excused themselves and went away in their car."

"Can't you take me in your car, Doctor, and help me to pursue them?" asked Prescott anxiously.

"Yes," agreed Dr. Bentley good-naturedly, "if you've any idea which direction to take in looking for them. A mile to the east three roads cross; half a mile to the west four roads cross. Our friends may be on any one of the seven roads, or they may have gone by a trail of their own."

Dick came to an abrupt stop, clenching his hands tightly.

"Isn't that luck for you?" he demanded ironically. Then, suddenly, his face brightened.

"No matter," he said. "They can be reached through the Eagle Hotel, in Gridley."

"Why should you want to reach them?" asked Laura curiously.

"Will you mind if I keep that to myself, for just a little while?" asked Dick, so pleasantly that Laura took no offense at all.

"How about my pudding?" called Jim. "Anyone going to want any of it?"

Did they? It was enjoyed to the full, and there was pudding left over, to be heated for another meal.

"Now, you boys had better come with me, and I'll show you how to keep some of the cooked meat over, in summer, without ice," proposed Mr. Ross.

"And my party must be getting along, or night will overtake us here," declared Dr. Bentley, rising from what had been a most hospitable board.

"Then fellows, please excuse me if I write a short note and ask Dr. Bentley to mail it," urged Dick.

So Dave Darrin mustered the other chums, marching them off in the wake of Mr. Ross, while Dick hastily scribbled a note, placed it in an envelope, and addressed it to Alonzo Hibbert, or Thomas Colquitt, Eagle Hotel, Gridley.

As Dick came out his other chums halted their labors long enough to take leave of Dr. Bentley and his party. They escorted the departing guests to their automobiles, and saw them start away.

Such of the roast meat as was to be saved was packed in metal pails, covered, and then the pails lowered into a brook, where the cool water would to a certain extent take the place of ice.

Then Mr. Ross and his helpers removed the folding tables and other loaned articles.

"Thank you, boys, for what you did to break the stampede of the herd," said Mr. Ross, waving his hand after he had sprung up into the saddle.

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Once more Dick & Co. had their camp all to themselves.

"I wish we could have such visitors every day," cried Darry enthusiastically.

"Yes," grinned Tom, "but how long would our canned goods hold out? We'd have to be rich, fellows, to entertain so many people every day, even if the meat end of the feast did come to us without cost."

"We want to make the camp shipshape again," Dick remarked, looking about. "There's a lot of refuse food to be burned. Greg, you start a fire. Dan you gather up every scrap of food that must be thrown away and burn it on said fire. Dave, you can set the tent to rights. I'll take an axe and hustle after some firewood. Dave, suppose you help me. Tom might put the camp to rights."

With the labor thus divided all hands set briskly to work. By the time that all the tasks had been performed the boys were glad to lie down on the grass and rest until it was time to prepare a light supper. After that meal was over Dave asked:

"We're going to keep regular guard to-night, aren't we?"

"Yes," Dick answered. "We'll turn in at nine o'clock and keep guard until six in the morning. That will be nine hours—an hour and a half of guard duty for each fellow. Suppose we draw lots to decide the order in which we shall take our tricks of guard duty."

This was done. To Prescott fell the second tour, from ten-thirty until midnight. Reade had the first tour.

At a few minutes after nine all was quiet in the camp. Five tired high school boys were soon sound asleep, with Reade, hidden in the deep shadows, watching outside.

It seemed to young Prescott that he had no more than dropped off into slumber when Tom shook him by the shoulder.

"Half-past ten," whispered Reade, as Dick sat up. "Go out to the wash basin and dash cold water into your eyes. That will open 'em and freshen you up."

"Have you seen anything of the prowler?" whispered Dick, as he got upon his feet.

"Not a sign," declared Tom.

"It would be too early for him to prowl about yet," whispered Dick, as he passed out into the Summer night. "Good night, Tom."



Only a faint stirring of the light breeze in the tree tops, the droning hum of night insects, and the occasional call of a night bird—these were all the sounds that came to the ears of the young camp guard.

Dick dashed the water into his eyes, then felt wonderfully wide awake.

“If Mr. Prowler comes, he’ll probably go for the canned vegetables and the biscuit,” Prescott decided. “He must already have more meat than he can handle all day tomorrow—if it doesn’t spoil.”

So Dick posted himself where he could easily watch the approach of any outsider toward the boxes that served as cupboards for the canned supplies.

The time slipped away, until it was nearly midnight, as Prescott knew from stepping into the tent and lighting a match briefly for a swift glimpse at his watch.

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As Dick came out of the tent he fancied he heard a distant step, crackling on a broken twig.

"If there's anyone coming I'd better slip into the shadow of the canvas," Prescott told himself, acting accordingly.

Presently the stealthy steps sounded nearer to the camp.

"Someone is coming, as sure as fate," Dick said to himself. "Shall I rouse one or two of the other fellows? But they might alarm the prowler. I'll handle him myself."

CHAPTER XI

A HARD PROWLER TO CATCH

It was the prowler.

Close to the tent he stopped to listen to the heavy breathing that came from the sound young sleepers. Dick crouched farther back into the shadow.

Uttering a low grunt, that was half chuckle, the prowler slipped along in the darkness, making toward the cupboards.

"My friend, I want a little talk with you," suddenly spoke Dick Prescott, slipping up behind the uninvited visitor.

The prowler wheeled quickly about.

"You don't want anything to do with me," he corrected, in a harsh voice. "I could eat two or three like you, and then have plenty of appetite left."

"Perhaps," smiled Dick Prescott undaunted.

"And I'll do it, too, if you don't stand back."

"But I want to talk with you, my friend," Dick insisted.

"I don't want to talk with you," snapped the prowler.

"You would, if you knew what I want to talk with you about," Prescott continued.

"Is it about food?" demanded the young stranger grimly.

"Then it's about jail," sneered the other harshly.



"Why about jail?" asked Dick.

"Because that's where you'd like to see me!"

"Why should I want to see you in jail?" Prescott demanded.

"Because I've been visiting your kitchen," leered the other. "But you can't stop me. Not all of your crowd can stop me!"

"Why do you wish to clean us out of food?" Prescott asked.

"Because I know how to eat," replied the young stranger significantly.

"Is that the only reason you have for trying to clean us all out of food?"

"Why should I have any other reason? And why isn't being hungry a good enough reason?" counter-queried the prowler.

"It has struck me," smiled Dick, "that perhaps you don't want us in these woods, anyway."

"I don't just hanker after your company," admitted the stranger, with gruff candor.

"Are we bothering you any here?"

"No matter," came the sullen retort.

"To return to the first subject, that matter about which I want to talk with you-----"

"Not to-night," growled the young prowler. Turning on his heel, he started to walk away.

But Dick kept close at his side.

"Shake my trail, you!" ordered the other gruffly. "If you don't you'll be sorry!"

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With that the stranger broke into a loping run. At first glance this gait didn't seem to be a swift one, but it was the long, easy, loping stride of the wolf in motion. Young Prescott found that he had to exert himself in order to keep up with the other.

"Go back to your shack!" ordered the prowler.

"Hold on a minute, so that I can talk with you," urged Prescott.

By this time they were at a considerable distance from the camp. Suddenly the prowler halted, wheeling about like a flash, glaring into young Prescott's eyes.

"Now, I'll learn you!" growled the prowler.

"Do you mean that you'll *teach* me?" queried Prescott. "What?"

"I'll learn you," growled the other, "not to keep on banging around me when I don't want you!"

"Do you happen to have any idea," Dick persisted coolly, "that your name is probably Page, and that you undoubtedly have a very rich father, who is trying to find you?"

"Where did you read that fairy tale?" sneered the prowler.

"Partly on your skin to-day," Dick rejoined, "when I came upon you as you were dressing near that pool."

"Stop kidding me!" commanded the other sternly. "And now back to you cosy little bed for you! Fade! Vanish! If you don't then you'll soon wish you had!"

But Dick held his ground, despite the very evident sincerity of the other's threat, and gazed unflinchingly back at the prowler.

"Let me tell you," Dick went on. "Of course I cannot be positive, but there is a missing heir who has, on his chest and one shoulderblade just such marks as I saw on you to-day when you were sitting by the pool putting on your shirt?"

"Oh, forget that thrilling stuff!" jeered the other. "Don't you suppose I know who my father is? Old Bill Mosher hasn't suddenly grown rich. How could Bill get rich when he is in jail for drunkenness?"

"So you think your name is Mosher?" pursued Prescott.

"I know it is," replied the prowler harshly. "And, around this neck of the woods a fellow couldn't have a harder, tougher name than Mosher."

“But if your name were really Page-----” pressed Dick.

“No use stringing me like that,” snapped the other. Even in the darkness, lit only here and there by starlight, the scowl on his face was visible. “Tell you what,” declared Mosher, an instant later.

“Well?”

“Beat it!”

“I don’t under-----”

“Yes, you do,” retorted the self-styled Mosher. “Vamoose! Twenty-three in a hurry! Make your get-away!”

“Until I’ve made you listen to reason,” Prescott insisted, “I won’t leave you.”

“Oh, yes, you will, and right now, or-----”

“No!”

“See here!”

Mosher held a hard, horny fist menacing before Dick’s face, but the high school boy failed to wince.

“Git! Now, or crawl later!” warned Mosher.

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“I’m going to make you listen to-----”

“Put up your guard!”

At least Mosher was “square” enough to give warning of his intentions. He threw himself on guard, then waited for perhaps five seconds.

“Are you going to cool down and listen!” demanded Dick Prescott firmly.

Out shot the Mosher youth’s left fist. Dick dodged. It was a feint; Dick nearly stopped Mosher’s right.

Blows rained in thickly now. Not every one could Prescott dodge, though he was more agile and better trained than this more powerful youth.

At last, smarting from a glancing blow on the nose, Dick darted in and clinched with his adversary. It was bad judgment, but punishment had stung him into desperate recklessness.

“Stop it!” panted the high school boy.

“Won’t!” retorted Mosher, increasing his pressure about the smaller boy’s waist until Prescott felt dizzy. In that extremity the Gridley boy worked a neat little trip. Down they went, rolling over and over, fighting like wild cats until Mosher secured the upper hand and sat heavily on the high school boy.

“I gave you all the chance I could,” growled Mosher, planting blow after blow on Dick’s head, face and chest, “and you wouldn’t help yourself anyway. Now, you’ll take all your medicine, and next time you meet me you’ll know enough to leave me alone.”

Held as he was, without really a show, Dick Prescott fought as long as he could, and with desperate courage. But at last he felt forced to yell:

“Fellows! Gridley! Here——quickly!”

“They’re too far away, and, besides, they’re asleep,” jeered Mosher, to the accompaniment of three more hard blows. “Now, I reckon you’ve had enough to know your own business after this and let mine alone. If I had any cord I’d tie you here. As it is-----”

Leaping suddenly to his feet, Mosher turned and ran swiftly through the woods.

Dick badly hurt, yet as determined as ever, pursued for a few score of yards. Then realizing that he could hear no sound of the other's steps to guide him in the right direction, the high school boy halted.

"I may as well give it up this time," he said to himself grimly. "Besides, my main job is to guard the camp. If I go roaming through the woods, Mosher, as he calls himself, will double back on the camp and clean out our provisions while I'm groping out here in the dark."

So Dick paused only long enough to make sure of his course back. Then he plodded along, wincing with the pain of many blows that he had received.

"I'm lucky, anyway, that I didn't get an eye bunged up," he reflected. "I smart and I ache, but I can see straight, and I don't believe I've received any blow that will disfigure me for the next few days. My, what a steam hammer that fellow is in a fight! I wonder if he really is the son of that hard character called Bill Mosher?"

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As Dick neared the camp he stepped more softly. He wanted to see whether Mosher really had come back.

But no figure was discernible in the clearing beyond the camp. Dick walked in more confidently. His first care was to examine the food supply.

"Nothing gone," Dick murmured. Then he looked about for a stick large enough to serve as a weapon at need. While doing so his glance fell upon an axe.

"I wouldn't use that," Prescott told himself. "But there is no knowing what Mosher would do if he got cornered by more than one of us. Hereafter we mustn't leave this thing outside."

Dick carried the axe into the tent, hiding it without awaking any of the other sleepers. Then he went outside, searching until he found a club that he thought would answer for defense.

Taking this with him he went over to the wash basin, where, wetting a towel, he bathed his battered face.

"Almost one o'clock," he remarked, after striking a match for a look at his watch. "I won't call Dave at all, but will stay up and call Harry at half-past one."

CHAPTER XII

"Tag" Is the game—tag Mosher!

"Now, come in with the sprint!" Dick sang out to Hazelton.

"Greg, Dave and Tom, you block him. Get through, Harry—some way! Don't let 'em stop you."

It was three days later, and Dick & Co. were at work at their main task during this summer camping, which was to train hard and try to fit themselves for the football squad when high school should open again.

Hazelton came on, at racing speed. He ducked low, making a gallant effort. He nearly succeeded in getting through, but Tom's tackle brought him to ground just at the right moment.

"Now, try that over again," Prescott said.

So the work went on, vigorously, for another hour—until all of the boys were tired out, hot and panting.

"That's the most grueling work I ever did in the same space of time," muttered Reade, mopping his face.

"Yes; it's the kind of work for which football calls," rejoined Prescott, also mopping his face. "Dan, get up off the ground!"

"I'm hot," muttered Dalzell, "and I'm tired."

"Then rest on a campstool. Don't chill yourself by lying on the ground when you're so warm."

After a few seconds of contemplated mutiny, Danny Grin rose and found a seat on a stool.

"As soon as you're cool, three of you go to the water and wash off," Dick ordered. "The other three of us will stay here until you get back."

That was the order of the day now. At least two, and usually three of Dick & Co. always remained near camp. If Mosher planned to come again he would find a "committee" waiting to receive him.

There were more supplies, too, to guard now than there had been. On the morning after Dick's encounter, a farmer had driven into camp. His wagon had been well laden with all manner of canned food supplies, even to tins of French mushrooms. These had come from Alonzo Hibbert, with a note of thanks for the entertainment of himself and friends.

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"These provisions are mighty welcome," Prescott had remarked at the time, "but I'm not sure but that I would rather have Hibbert himself here—I've so much to tell him."

"He'll come, in time, when he gets your letter at the Eagle House," Reade had answered, for Dick had told all his chums his suspicions regarding young Mosher.

"What are we to do this afternoon?" asked Dave, seating himself beside Prescott as three of the chums started for the swimming pool.

"Gymnastics," Dick replied. "Especially bar work. And some boxing, of course."

"You ought to be excused from boxing for the present," grinned Darry. "You look as though you had had enough for a while."

For Dick's left cheek was still decorated with a bruise that young Mosher had planted there. The boxing of Dick & Co., this summer, was real work. It was done with bare knuckles, though, of course, without anger or the desire to do injury. Boxing with bare knuckles was Prescott's own idea for hardening himself and his chums for the rough work of the gridiron.

"I'll take my share of the boxing," Dick retorted. "Having a sore spot on my face will make me all the more careful in my guard."

"Queer we don't hear from Hibbert," mused Greg Holmes.

"Not at all," Dave contended. "Hibbert simply isn't back at the Eagle House yet, and perhaps the hotel people have had no orders about forwarding his mail. It may be a fortnight before we hear from him."

"Thanks to the thoughtfulness of Hibbert we can remain in camp a good deal more than a fortnight longer," observed Prescott, glancing over the greatly increased food supply.

"Perhaps it was all right for Hibbert to repay our courtesy the other day, but he has sent us something like twenty or thirty times as much food as his party ate."

"I guess Hibbert has more money than he knows what to do with," mused Greg aloud.

"Even if he has," Prescott smiled seriously, "there is no reason why he should feel called upon to keep us in food. I'd give four fifths of that food to know where to reach Hibbert, or any of that party, in a hurry. Jupiter!"

"What's up?" asked Dave, eyeing his chum in astonishment, for Dick had suddenly leaped to his feet, and was now dancing about like an Indian.

"Say, but we must have fried eggs in the place of brains!" cried young Prescott reproachfully.

“What calls forth that severe remark?” demanded Darry.

“Why, we know well enough where to get hold of Hibbert’s party,” Dick went on.

“Do we?” asked Greg.

“Certainly,” cried Dick triumphantly. “Just send a note to Mr. Colquitt in care of Blinders’ Detective Agency. I’m going to write the note now!”

Dick was half-way to the tent when Darry called after him:

“By the way, in what city is the Blinders’ agency located?”

Dick halted short, looking blank.

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"I don't know," he admitted. "Do you fellows?"

None of them did. Then they waited until the others came in from the pool. But none of them knew what city had the honor to shelter the Blinders' agency.

"I'll write the note, anyway," Dick insisted. "If I can't do better, I'll put the address as simply the United States, with a request on the envelope for the post-office people to find the right city and deliver the letter."

"Go ahead with the letter," urged Tom. "After dinner I'll walk over to Five Corners and mail the letter. Incidentally, I'll make inquiries over there and see whether anyone knows the city in which the Blinders' crowd has its headquarters."

So Dick wrote the letter, while others were preparing the noon meal. At one o'clock in the afternoon Tom started, on his round-trip tramp of twenty-two miles.

"A trip like that will take the place of training for one half day," Reade explained.

Hazelton offered to go with him, but Tom declined on the ground that he could get over ground faster without Harry.

It was an hour after dark when Reade returned that night, hot, tired, dusty and hungry. But he had found the correct address of the agency and the letter had started on its journey.

"Your supper is all ready," Dick announced.

"And I'm ready to meet any supper more than half way," Reade retorted. "Just a minute, until I wash up."

The other five boys sat and chatted by the table while Tom ate.

"Dan, won't you throw a lot more wood on the fire?" asked Dick, as the meal came to a close. "We ought to have the camp better lighted than this."

Greg sprang to help Dalzell. Soon the flames leaped up, throwing their ruddy, cheerful glow over the camp and making dancing shadows beyond under the trees.

While they were still chatting over the day's doings, steps were heard, followed by the arrival in camp of two rough-looking, stern-faced men. Dave Darrin sprang to pick up a club.

"You boys haven't been doing anything wrong, have you?" questioned one of the men, with a trace of a smile.



"Of course not," Dick indignantly replied.

"Then you needn't be afraid of us, though I admit that we do look rough," answered the same man, displaying a badge. "We're officers of the law."

"What can we do for you, sir?" Prescott inquired more respectfully.

"Do you boys know anything about Tag Mosher?" demanded the same speaker.

"Son of Bill Mosher?" Dick counter-queried.

"The same. Know anything about him?"

"Nothing, except that he bothered us a good deal when we were first camped here," Prescott replied.

"Do you know him by sight, then?"

"We all do."

"When was Tag here last?" pressed the officer.

"About three days ago," Dick answered. "He stole quite a bit of our food supply."

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"That's an old trick of that young tough," rejoined the deputy sheriff. "That's how the boy got the nickname of 'tag.' He won't work, and lives on other people's work. Anything that he can say 'tag' to he thinks belongs to him."

"Then, in other words, sir," asked Dave Darrin, "Tag Mosher is just a plain thief?"

"A good deal that way," replied the deputy. "But with this difference: Up to date Tag never stole anything except what he needed at the moment for his own comfort. He never robbed people to enrich himself, but just to save himself the trouble of working. Now, however, we've a more serious charge against him."

"What?" asked Dick,

"I don't know whether the courts will call it felonious assault," replied the deputy. "But Tag stole two chickens out of the chicken coop of Henry Leigh, a new farmer in these parts. Leigh trailed Tag to the woods and found him cooking the chickens. Leigh tried to grab Tag, but Tag caught up a big stone and just slammed it against Leigh's head. Leigh is now in bed at home, with a fractured skull, and likely to die. He described Tag to us, and we're after him. The county has put a reward of two hundred and fifty dollars on Tag's head. After we've come up with him I guess it will be many a year before Tag Mosher will have a chance to do any more stealing or fighting. But if you haven't seen him here in three days we may as well be moving on. Thank you. Of course, if you see Tag, you won't tell him anything about our being here?"

"Certainly not, sir," Dick answered. "By the way, do you want any help?"

"Meaning some of you boys?" asked the deputy.

"Some of us will help you, if we can," Dick assured him.

"How many?"

"We ought to leave half our number to guard the camp, for Tag may show up here and wreck things. Three of us can go with you."

"You may run into some ugly fighting, if you go with us," warned the deputy. "Tag Mosher is no coward!"

"We're not afraid of fighting, when we're in the right," Prescott replied promptly.

"Besides, we've got a grudge of our own against Tag Mosher, anyway," Dave said.

"Not a grudge, I hope," Dick rebuked his chum. "But we'll stand by to help the law, if we get a chance."

"I reckon maybe we could use three of you," meditated the deputy aloud. "Boys can beat up woods as well as men. But we may not be able to get you back here before tomorrow noon."

"That will be all right," Dick assured him. "Dave and Greg, you'll join me in going with the officers, won't you?"

Darry and Holmes both assented eagerly.

"If you've any extra grub, then, put it up and come along," urged the deputy. "There's room for five in the automobile we're using."

"How did you men know that we were here?" Reade inquired, while Dick and Greg made haste to get food together for the trip.

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"Saw your campfire," replied the deputy laconically. "We didn't believe Tag would build such a large fire, but we took a chance and looked in. If you haven't anything else to do, young Long-legs, you might pick out three stout clubs for your friends."

Laughing good-naturedly at the nickname, Tom bestirred himself. Within three minutes all was ready.

Dick, Dave and Greg stepped away after the officers. Not far away was the road, where the automobile stood with the engine running.

"Does Tag know how to run a car?" Prescott inquired.

"Don't know," replied the deputy.

"If he does, and had happened to be about, he could have taken your car in good shape," smiled Dick.

"True," nodded the officer, "but there were only two of us, and nabbing Tag Mosher is two men's work."

"I ought to know that," laughed Dick. "He gave me a stiff enough beating."

"Here is where you can even the score," laughed Dave grimly.

"I don't want to even any score," replied Prescott gravely. "I'm sorry for the fellow, especially when he was so close to a chance to turn about and make something of himself."

"Do you mean to say that you don't hold even a bit of a grudge for that severe beating you got?" demanded Darry wonderingly.

"Of course I don't," Dick retorted. "When two fellows fight one of them must receive a beating—that's the sporting chance. All my feelings for Tag are of sympathy."

"Not enough so you'd let him get away, if you met him?" put in the deputy quickly.

"Of course, not, sir," Dick answered quickly flushing. "That would be as much as to say that I'm a bad citizen. If I find Tag I'll do my best to hold him until help comes. You may be sure of that."

"Then get into the car," ordered the deputy briefly. "The back part of the car is for you youngsters. That reminds me. We don't know each other's names. Mine's Simmons."

The other deputy's name proved to be Valden. The boys quickly introduced themselves.

Away went the car, over the rough roads. To avoid sending warning too far ahead the lights were turned low. On account of the condition of this rough forest road the speed was slow.

"If Tag hasn't been to your camp within three nights," said Mr. Simmons, leaning back while Mr. Valden ran the car, "then it's because he isn't in this neighborhood. So we'll travel on a few miles before we stop to do any real searching."

"I don't understand how you can expect to find anyone out here in the night time," Dick observed.

"I've some plans in my mind," was all the explanation Simmons offered.

When the road became a little better, Valden put on a bit more speed.

"Better slow down," advised Simmons presently. "There's a bridge ahead that isn't any, too strong."

That bridge was closer than the deputy thought. Just then the automobile top brushed heavily against foliage in making a wooded turn in the road.

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"There's the bridge!" yelled Simmons almost excitedly. "Slow down—stop!"

Valden tried to obey, but the bridge was altogether too close for stopping in time. Out over the planks ran the car.

R-r-rip! Crash!

Some of the boards were already missing from the rude bridge. Others gave way almost like paper. Down through the structure fell the car, then landed with a splash, overturning to the accompaniment of cries of fright and of pain from its occupants.

CHAPTER XIII

In A fix!

As the water in the creek was barely three feet deep, Officer Valden sprang from the car, holding his right hand, which had been caught in the brake mechanism.

Deputy Simmons appeared to be uninjured.

Greg Holmes went under water, his head striking a stone violently enough to bring a splash of blood to his forehead.

Dave Darrin's head struck against the side of the car, bringing a cry of pain from him.

Yet, though he was dizzy from the concussion, Darry displayed the coolest head of any of them in the first few moments.

"Where's Dick?" he called, when he saw the others accounted for. Then Dave wrenched off one of the lamps, holding it to aid his vision.

"There he is!" shouted Darrin, as his foot touched something. "His head is under water. Up with him, quickly!"

Dave brought the rays of the lantern to bear more directly, while Simmons sprang to the rescue. Greg, too, joined in.

"He's pinned down by the car!" gasped Deputy Simmons after finding Prescott's submerged body and giving it a hard tug. "Valden, help me lift the car on this side! You two boys pull your friend out when we lift the car. Now!"

Though Deputy Valden was able to employ only his left hand, he used it with all his strength.

"Here he comes," panted Dave, tugging at Dick's body with all his might. "Gracious! I hope he isn't drowned!"

Greg, too, exerted all his strength. Though it seemed ages to the anxious ones it was really but the work of a few seconds.

As Dick's head emerged above the surface of the water he gave a quick gasp. Then another.

"Oh, the air seems good," he moaned. "I tried to keep from opening my mouth or breathing, but it nearly burst my lungs!"

"Are you all right now?" asked Darry, holding his chum up.

"If you'll help me to the bank I shall be, I think," answered Prescott weakly.

"Why, what-----" began Dave anxiously.

"I was badly bruised by being pinned under the car," Dick admitted, in a still weaker voice.

"No bones broken, eh?" broke in Greg Holmes.

"I—I think not," Dick answered.

"Don't keep him talking," ordered Dave sternly. "Put in your strength and help me lift good old Dick up into the road."

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"I guess I can do that job better," interposed Simmons, who had let go of the car. "Let me have the boy."

Dick was borne up to the road in the deputy's strong arms.

"Can you stand?" asked Simmons.

"Put me on my feet, sir, and let me see," begged Dick.

He took a few steps, wincing, his face white.

"Dick, old fellow," faltered Dave, "I'm afraid you've broken a leg."

"No; or I couldn't stand on my legs and walk," Prescott replied. "It hurts up here, where the side of the car rested."

He placed one hand on his right hip.

"Then your hip is broken," groaned Darry.

"I don't believe that, either," argued Dick. "If my hip were broken I don't believe I could move my leg or step."

He took two or three steps, wincing painfully, to show what he could do.

"Nothing but a hip bruise, or I'm guessing wrong," smiled the white-faced sufferer.

"In any case, you're meat for a doctor," put in Deputy Simmons, with rough sympathy.

"All right," replied Dick. "I'll walk to the doctor's office. How many miles is it?"

"About fourteen," replied Simmons. "I'll bring the doctor to you. It's only about six miles to Ross' farm. I'll borrow his car. Then I can make good time getting the doctor and bringing him here. But you'd better sit down before I start."

"Aren't you going to do anything with the car in the creek?" inquired Prescott.

"What can we do?" demanded the deputy laconically. "There isn't muscle enough in this crowd to hoist the car up the bank. Anyway, her engine is damaged beyond a doubt. No, no, Prescott, you sit down, or lie down, and the rest of you had better wait here until I bring help. I can be back in three hours at the latest. Darrin, will you place one of the lamps at either end of where the bridge was? That may save some farmer from driving in on top of the car."

Dave complied willingly enough. Then Simmons turned to Prescott.

"Now, you sit down, young man," ordered the deputy.

"I'd rather not," Dick replied. "I haven't anything worse than a bruise. If I keep too quiet the injury will stiffen all the more. I must move my hip a bit, or I may be in for a worse time."

"That may be true," nodded the deputy thoughtfully. "Well, be good, all of you. I'll be back again, as soon as possible."

With that he strode down into the creek, wading through and coming out at the farther side. Then he was lost among the shadows.

Though it hurt to keep on his feet, Dick, after some minutes, found that he could move about a little more freely, despite the pain.

"That shows there are no bones broken," he assured his distressed chums.

"Does it?" asked Darrin. "Hang it, I wish I knew more about injuries of this sort. Then I might be able to help you."

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"Why, I may be all right, and able to sprint in another half hour," smiled Dick.

"Yes, you will!" jeered Greg. "Dick, you won't run for a few days to come, anyway."

"A nice lot we are, to set out to aid the law's officers," remarked Dave disgustedly. "Dick can take only a half a step per minute. Mr. Valden can use only one hand. Greg's head looks gory. The lot of us couldn't scare a baby now!"

"I can still say, boo!" Prescott laughed.

"Is it wise to try to do so much walking?" questioned Darry, as Greg went back to the creek to wash the blood from the shallow cut on his forehead.

"Yes; for I don't want to grow stiff until I'm where I can take care of myself," Dick answered, taking a few more steps. "No; don't help me. I want to move alone, and I'm strong enough for that."

So Dave threw himself on the grass to rest until he bethought himself that, wet as they all were, it might be a good idea to build a fire for drying purposes.

He busied himself in that way, while Dick started slowly, very painfully, down the road. Only a step at a time could he go. Greg, returning, ran after him, but Prescott sent him back, so Holmes stretched himself on the ground near the fire.

At times Dick found he could move about very easily. Then the hip would stiffen and he would be obliged to lean against a tree for a few moments.

For ten minutes or longer he moved thus down the road.

"I'd better be getting back soon, I guess," he mused, "or I may find it too much of a job."

Looking back, as he turned, he could just make out the glow of the fire, very dim, indeed, from where he stood.

"I've got a beacon," smiled Dick, as he rested against a tree trunk just off the road. He was about to take a step when a figure glided stealthily by.

"By all that's astonishing, it's Tag Mosher!" Prescott gasped. He clutched at the tree trunk again, watching, for Tag had halted and appeared to be peering hard through the foliage at the fire some distance away.

"I wouldn't want him to find me, now!" thought Dick, a cold chill running over him at the thought of Tag's desperate savagery.

But at that moment Prescott accidentally made a sound, which, slight though it was, caught young Mosher's ear.

In a twinkling Tag wheeled about, listening, peering. Then, straight toward Prescott he came.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" demanded young Mosher harshly.

"Yes," Prescott admitted, speaking as steadily as he could, though his heart sank for the moment. He knew that Tag would have time to give him a beating that would be doubly severe in his present condition of weakness and pain. That beating could be given in a few swift seconds, and the help within reach of Dick's voice could not arrive until young Mosher had had time to slip away among the trees of the forest that he knew so well.

"What do you want with me?" demanded Tag, bringing his leering face closer to Prescott's.

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CHAPTER XIV

Thrashing an ambulance case!

"I want you to stand right where you are until some of my friends come," Dick made answer.

Then he braced himself for the violent assault that, he felt, was sure to come. To his intense astonishment, however, Tag heaved a sigh of dejection, then muttered:

"I may as well do it. You owe me a grudge, anyway, and you've got the upper hand this time."

What on earth could it mean? For a brief instant Dick almost believed that the exciting incidents of the night had been but parts of a dream. But he raised his voice to shout:

"Dave! Oh, Dave! Come here! You, too, Greg."

"Coming," came the call, in Darry's voice. The sound of running feet sounded on the road.

Tag Mosher glanced uneasily about, as if meditating flight. Then his keen eyes scrutinized Prescott's face.

"What's up?" demanded Dave, as, even in the darkness he caught sight of another figure.

"Darry," smiled Dick, "I wish to present my friend, Mr. Tag Mosher."

"What?" gasped Darrin. "This Tag Mosher. By Jove, it is, it? How on earth did you make him wait for us?"

Then, all in a flying heap Dave projected himself against young Mosher, clinching with him and bearing him down to the ground. In order to make doubly sure Greg joined in the assault. But Tag, though he struggled, did not put up much of a fight.

"Quit!" he ordered sullenly. "I'm all in. Can't you fellows see that? But if I hadn't been sick I'd either have gotten away, or would have given you fellows a fight that you'd never forget!"

Quick-witted Dave was not long in discovering that Tag really was weak, as though from a recent illness.

"Say," demanded Darry, "have we been exerting ourselves to thrash an ambulance case?" His voice rang with self disgust.

"If I'd been a well one," growled Tag, "you never would have put me down, or held me. But I'm like a kitten to-night——strength all gone!"

"What's going on here?" asked Deputy Valden, putting in a more leisurely appearance.

"Something right in your line," Dick answered. "Dave and Greg are holding down Tag Mosher."

"You're not fooling, are you?" demanded the deputy. "You're not making any mistake, either?"

"We know Tag Mosher when we see him," Darry retorted. "We've good enough reason for knowing him."

With his uninjured left hand Deputy Valden reached for his pair of handcuffs, passing them to Dave.

"Here you are, Darrin," said the officer. "You know how to put these things on, don't you?"

"I can figure the job out, sir," Dave made reply.

Tag submitted, wearily, to having the steel bracelets snapped over his wrists. Then he heaved a sigh that had something of a sob in it.

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"I let you put these on, but I wish you'd take them off again," he said, addressing Valden. "I know I'm bad, and I know I'm tough, but I never had these things on my hands before. Take 'em off, won't you? Please!"

Such submission was tame, indeed. Deputy Valden, who had never seen young Mosher before glanced sharply at young Prescott.

"This fellow doesn't seem much like the hardened criminal I've been told about," remarked the officer.

"Did Prescott tell you I was tough?" demanded the prisoner. "He ought to know! He had a touch of my style when I was feeling better than I feel to-night. I suppose I've been nabbed for helping myself to a sandwich or two from their camp."

"Do you demand to know why you're under arrest?" inquired Deputy Valden.

Tag nodded.

"Well, then," continued the deputy, "you're wanted for cracking the skull of a farmer named Leigh. There's a doubt if Leigh will live and you may be charged with killing him."

"I? Killed a farmer?" demanded Tag, in what appeared to be very genuine amazement.

"Leigh says you're the chap that did it," Valden answered.

"I never heard of a man of any such name," argued Tag. "Still, if he says I did it, oh, well, he ought to know, and I suppose it will be all right."

"It'll have to be all right—whatever the courts may do to you, Mosher," Deputy Valden rejoined curtly. "Darrin, will you help the prisoner to his feet and lead him back to where the bridge was? Simmons will expect to find us there when he gets back."

So Darry and Greg Holmes assisted young Mosher to his feet. Dave took hold of Tag's arm, though the latter did not resist, but walked along like one in a dream.

"Want any help, Dick?" asked Greg.

"I believe I wouldn't object to having a friendly arm to lean on," Prescott replied. "I've been standing here so long that my hip is stiff again."

As the leader of Dick & Co. moved down the road, Tag turned in astonishment.

"What's the matter?" Tag asked, at last.

"We were in an automobile accident, and I was slightly injured," Dick confessed.

"And you can hardly walk?"

"I can walk only with effort and considerable pain," said Dick.

Tag Mosher whistled softly.

"My luck is leaving me," declared Mosher ruefully. "Prescott, when I saw you and looked you over I didn't see that you are a cripple. I thought you were in as good shape as ever. As for me, I can't do much to-night, I'm so weak. I thought that, if I tried to fight, you'd handle me easily enough. If I ran, I knew I couldn't run far, and you'd jump on my back and bear me to the ground. So I thought it easier to let you have your own way with me. Whee! I didn't do a thing but surrender to a cripple that ought to be on crutches! My luck is gone!"

This last was said with an air of great dejection, as though Tag never looked to have any further pleasure in life. Presently he muttered, half aloud:

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"And now they say that I've committed a murder! They'll prove it on me, too. Tag Mosher, you're done for."

"Anyway, you're in a rather bad fix, young man," confirmed Deputy Valden. "Even with the best luck you'll be locked up for some years to come."

"That will kill me!" muttered Tag sullenly. "I can't live anywhere outside of the big forest. In jail—why, I'd die of lack of fresh air! My father, old Bill Mosher, can get along in jail all right—he's used to it. But me? The first two weeks behind bars will kill me!"

"You should have thought of that before you cracked Leigh's skull," retorted Deputy Valden.

"I tell you that I didn't do it, and that I never before heard of a man of that name!" cried Tag Mosher fiercely.

"Leigh says you did," the deputy again informed the prisoner.

"Oh, well, then, we'll say that I did," agreed Tag moodily. "I'm as good as finished, if the charge has been made. No one around here would think of believing anything that Tag Mosher might say."

Somehow, despite the unsavory reputation of the prisoner, Dick Prescott found himself feeling more than ordinary sympathy for this dejected prisoner. Could it be possible that Tag really was innocent of this last and most serious charge against him? It didn't seem likely that the officers had gone after the wrong young man.

"Tag is bad, and yet there's also good in him that is very close to the surface," Prescott told himself. "It seems really too bad to think of this young fellow being locked up, away from the sunshine and the fresh air of the woods. And yet, if he makes a sport of manslaughter, of course he'll have to be put away where he can't do any harm. Oh, dear! I wonder why I feel so much sympathy for a fellow of this kind?"

They were at the broken bridge, now, with the wreck of the automobile lying in the creek.

"Mosher," said the deputy sternly, "Officer Simmons suspects that you believed we'd be after you, and that you tore up some of the planks from this crazy old bridge, so that our car would be wrecked. Did you do that?"

"Oh, I suppose I must have," replied Tag, with the air of one who feels it fruitless to deny what peace officers were prepared to charge against one of his bad reputation.

"Then you admit damaging the bridge?" asked Valden.

"I admit nothing of the kind," Tag retorted.

"Who ripped the boards up?"

"I don't know."

"We'll prove it against you," declared Valden positively.

"Oh, I s'pose you will," grumbled Tag. "It's easy to prove anything against old Bill Mosher's son. My dad's where he can't help me."

"Are you going to play the baby act?" asked the deputy, half-sneeringly.

"Wait until I've had a week of good eating and sound sleeping, and then see if you can find anything babyish about me," snapped the prisoner.

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Dick Prescott watched the pair, feeling a rising resentment against the deputy. Yet Valden was only resorting to tricks as old as the police themselves—the taunting of a prisoner into talking too much and thereby betraying his guilt.

“Pardon me, Tag,” Dick now interposed, “but it’s a principle of law that a prisoner doesn’t have to talk unless he wants to. I don’t believe, if I were you, I’d say anything just now.”

“I’m not going to say anything more,” Tag retorted moodily, yet with a flash of somewhat sullen gratitude to Prescott.

“Humph! You’d better talk, and get all you know out of your system,” advised Deputy Valden contemptuously. “And the first thing you’d better own up to is pulling the missing planks up from this crazy old bridge.”

Tag snorted, yet had no word to say. Instead, as best he could with his hands in the steel bracelets, he helped himself to a seat on the ground his back against a tree. Either he was extremely weary, or he was pretending cleverly.

“Come! I guess you can talk better standing up,” admonished Deputy Valden, seizing Tag by the coat collar and dragging him to his feet. Mosher accepted the implied order in sullen silence.

“Is it necessary, Mr. Valden, to torment the prisoner?” asked Dick quietly.

“The way I handle a prisoner is my business,” replied Valden rather crisply.

“You’d rather sit down, wouldn’t you, Tag?” Dick inquired. Young Mosher answered only with a nod.

“It makes you feel weaker to stand, doesn’t it?” Prescott continued.

Another nod.

“Mr. Valden,” Dick pressed, “I hope you won’t think me too forward, but I believe this prisoner, and I am going to urge you to let him find comfort by sitting down and resting.”

“What have you got to say about it?” demanded Mr. Valden, so brusquely that Dick flushed.

“I’m not in a position of authority, and I admit it,” Prescott replied. “But I think I have a right to object when I see a human being tormented needlessly, haven’t I?”

“You have no right to interfere in any way with an officer,” rejoined Valden less brusquely.

“Nor do I intend trying to interfere with a peace officer in anything proper that he does,” Dick went on quietly, though with spirit. “It seems that Tag Mosher has a right to rest himself by sitting down. If he tries again to sit down, and if you stop him from so doing, then Tag, if he wishes, may have me summoned to court to tell how he was tormented. I’ll be willing to tell just whatever I may see here.”

Valden snorted, almost inaudibly, then turned away. Tag slid down to the ground again, resting against the tree trunk, and preserving absolute silence.

The time passed slowly, but at last Deputy Simmons came in a car, followed by another car which contained a young man whom he introduced as Dr. Cutting.

“I’ll take you right back to camp,” announced Dr. Cutting, after Simmons had looked over his prisoner and then introduced the physician to Prescott. “I can examine you better when I have you at your summer home and handy to your bed. Can you get into the car?”

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"I can use my arms to draw myself up," Dick answered.

"Then let me see how well you can do it," urged the young physician, stepping back to watch Prescott, yet ready to assist him if necessary.

Dick got himself into the tonneau of the car, after some painful effort.

"Doc, you'll take the boys back to their camp, won't you?" called Simmons.

"Certainly."

"And remember, Prescott," called Simmons, "you've been aiding the county to-night, and the county will pay Doctor Cutting's bill."

Valden and Simmons exchanged some words in an undertone, after which the latter deputy came over to where Prescott sat.

"Valden tells me you have been interfering between him and Tag Mosher," began the officer. "How was it?"

Dick gave a quick, truthful account of his interference.

"You did right, Prescott," agreed Simmons, gripping the boy's hand. "Remember that any citizen has a right to interfere when he sees a prisoner being abused. Valden is a good fellow at bottom, and he's a brave fighter in time of real trouble. But he's just like a lot of other policemen who feel that they have to get all the evidence in a case. All a peace officer has to do is to find a criminal and make the arrest. It's the district attorney's business to get the evidence, but there are a good many peace officers to whom you can't teach that. Prescott, the next time you see a prisoner being abused you are to do the same as you did this time. I hope your hip will soon be all right again. I'll try to look in on you in a day or two at your camp. Thank you for what you did for law and order to-night. Good night!"

CHAPTER XV

THE INTERRUPTION OF A TRAINING BOUT

"Hazelton, the trouble with you is that you tackle a dummy just the way you'd catch a sack of potatoes that was being thrown out of a burning house!" laughed Dick.

"I don't see any other way to tackle a dummy," grunted Harry, looking puzzled.

"Why, you are supposed to tackle the dummy just as you'd tackle a running football player coming toward you," Prescott rejoined. "Greg, stand off there about fifty yards.

At the word, run straight toward Harry. Hazelton, you grab hold of Holmes and don't let him get by you. Just hang on, and try to put him on the ground at that. All ready, Greg! Run. Tackle him, Harry!"

This time Hazelton entered into the play with great zest. Just in the nick of time he leaped at Greg, tackled him and bore him to the ground.

"That's the way!" cheered Dick. "Now, you look alive, Hazelton."

"That was because I had something to tackle that was alive," Harry retorted. "It's much easier to tackle a living fellow than a stuffed dummy. What's the good of using the dummy, anyway, when we have plenty of live fellows around here?"

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"Oh, the dummy has its uses," Dick replied wisely. "A lot of faults can be better observed with a dummy for a background than is the case when you tackle a live one. The dummy is better for showing up the defects in your work. Now, Reade, you make a few swift assaults on the dummy."

Tom did his work so cleverly as to call forth admiration from all the onlookers.

A stout pole had been lashed across the space between two trees, being made secure in the forks of the lower limbs of the trees. The dummy itself had been made of old sail canvas and excelsior. It was not a very impressive-looking object, but it made a good substitute for the football dummies manufactured by sporting goods houses.

It was a little more than a week since the night when Tag Mosher had been captured. Dick's hip which had been pronounced by Doctor Cutting as only bruised and strained, had now mended so far that nothing wrong could be observed in his gait. In fact, Prescott had all but ceased to remember the accident.

For the others, the days had been full of football training, with long tramps and fishing and berrying jaunts thrown in for amusement. Now that Tag Mosher was safely locked up in the county jail there had been no more raids on the food supplies of the camp. It was now necessary, therefore, to leave but one boy at a time in the camp, and Dick, while his hip was mending, had usually been that one.

Every member of Dick & Co. was brown as a berry. Muscles, too, were beginning to stand out with a firmness that had never been observed at home in the winter time. Enough more of this camping and hard work and training, and Dick & Co. were likely to return to Gridley as six condensed young giants. Nothing puts the athlete in shape as quickly as does camping, combined with training, in the summer time.

This morning the work had begun with practice kicks, passing from that to the work of tackling the dummy. Two hours of hard work had now been put in, and all were comfortably tired.

"Let's keep quiet and cool off," urged Dick at last. "Then for the swimming pool and clean clothes."

"I wonder if Tag has died yet, as he expected to, now that he's out of the forest and locked up in a jail?" mused Tom Reade aloud.

"He must be in fearfully depressed spirits," muttered Dick sympathetically.

Dave Darrin regarded his chum curiously.

"Dick, you seem to have a positive sympathy for that fellow."

"I have," Prescott avowed promptly.

"You even seem to like him," pressed Darry.

"I do like him," Dick assented. "Darry, I believe that a lot of good might be found in Tag Mosher if he could have the same chance that most other fellows have. Usually, when a fellow says he has had no chance in life, the fact really is that he has been too lazy to take his chance. But I don't believe that Tag ever had a real, sure-enough chance. He has spent his days with a drunkard and a vagabond."

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"Yet Tag has been to school," objected Tom Reade. "Tag talks like a fellow who has had a very fair amount of schooling. Schools teach something more than mere book lessons. They give a fellow some of the first principles of truth and honor. Despite his schooling, however, Tag prefers to steal as a means of supplying all his needs. And now, at last, he is in jail, charged, perhaps, with killing a fellow being."

"I wonder if Mr. Leigh is dead yet?" mused Dick. "I like being off here in the deep forest like this, but there's one drawback. We don't hear much news."

"What news do you want?" asked a familiar voice behind him. Soft-footed Deputy Simmons stalked into the circle.

"We were just wondering, Mr. Simmons," spoke Prescott, rising, "if Mr. Leigh is dead yet?"

"Not yet," replied the peace officer, "but the doctors say that he is likely to die any day now."

"Then will Tag be charged with manslaughter—or murder?"

"He may be charged with murder, if we can catch him," replied the deputy.

"If you can ca-----Why, what's up?" asked Dick eagerly.

"Tag broke out of jail last night," replied the officer.

"He's—at large?"

"That's what he is," nodded Simmons. "Tag was looked upon as a kid, and wasn't watched as carefully as he should have been. So he got out. Not only that, but he visited the warden's office, late at night. So, when he left, he took with him a sawed-off shotgun—one of the wickedest weapons ever invented—and a revolver and plenty of ammunition. That's what I'm doing in the woods now. I came to see if you had seen Tag to-day, but your asking for news of him shows me that you haven't."

"Is Mr. Valden with you?" asked Dick.

"Yes; he's over at the road, in the car. He wouldn't come to camp. I guess the truth is"—Simmons' eyes twinkled—that Valden is ashamed to see you after the rebuke you gave him the other night, Prescott. After we got young Mosher to the jail and locked up, I gave Valden a talking-to, and told him I'd report him to the sheriff if I ever heard of his abusing a prisoner again."

"So Tag escaped, with some field artillery, and you officers are out after him?" Tom asked.

"Yes; and three other pairs of deputies are out also," nodded Mr. Simmons.

"Did you get that car out of the creek?" asked Darry. "We never heard."

"That car was a complete wreck," replied the officer. "We got it out of the creek, but left it in the woods nearby. The bridge has been rebuilt, and is stronger than before. How's your hip, Prescott?"

"As well as ever, thank you," replied Dick.

"I'm glad to know that, boy. Meant to drop in on you before. I must hurry along now. Of course, if Tag shows up about your camp, you won't tell him that you've seen me."

"Certainly not, sir," nodded Dick. "We'll also try to get word to you, if we see him. Where is your home?"

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"Five Corners is my address," replied the deputy. "So long, boys! Glad to have seen you again."

The cat-footed deputy was soon lost to sight among the trees.

Dave was the first to speak, and that was some moments later.

"Dick, you're foolish to feel any liking for Tag Mosher. He's bad all the way through. As it was he was locked up on a charge of possible manslaughter, and now he has escaped, taking with him firearms and ammunition enough to rid the county of peace and police officers. He'll do it, too, if he's cornered. Now, where's the good in that kind of a pest?"

"I don't know how to answer you," sighed Dick. "Perhaps I am foolish, but I'm not yet prepared to admit it. Instead, I still contend that I feel a sneaking liking for poor Tag."

"'Poor Tag,' indeed!" mimicked Tom Reade. "Poor wives and kids of the deputy sheriffs whom Tag may shoot down in their tracks before he's cornered at last! Dick, young Mosher is a budding outlaw and a bad egg all around."

"No decent citizen should feel any sort of sympathy for him," affirmed Harry Hazelton.

"Let Dick alone," objected Greg Holmes. "Dick generally knows what he's about, even in regard to his emotions and sympathies."

"What do you say, Danny?" asked Dave.

"May the sheriff deliver me from Tag Mosher!" replied Danny Grin.

"You're a prejudiced lot," smiled Dick, as he rose from his camp stool. "Who'll watch camp this time while the rest of us go to swimming pool?"

"I will," Darry volunteered.

Carrying clean underclothing, soap and towels from the tent, the other five started through the woods to a new swimming pool that had been discovered lately.

When they returned Dave went away alone for his bath. Tom Reade, as the cook for the day, lifted the lid of the soup pot to examine the contents.

"I wish one of you fellows would go out into the woods and bring in some of that flowering savory herb for the soup," called Tom.

"I know the kind you mean," nodded Prescott. "I'll go and get it."

He strolled off in the opposite direction from the pool. Yet, truth to tell, his mind was very little on the herb he was seeking. His mind dwelt almost completely on the thought of Tag Mosher, once more at large, and most likely roaming about somewhere in this vast expanse of woods.

"I don't believe it's so much badness in Tag, as it is that he's just a plain, simple savage, with the instincts and the passions of the savage," Dick reflected. "I wonder if Tag ever did really have a chance to be decent? Poor fellow! If he must be caught and returned to jail, and by and by pay the penalty of his attack upon Farmer Leigh, then I don't believe he ever will have a real chance to try to be decent again. I wonder if I'm wrong and the other fellows are right? Perhaps Tag would scorn a chance to be an all-around decent fellow. I wonder. I wonder!"

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His musings led Prescott rather far afield. At last he halted, looking about him in some bewilderment.

"Humph! That's queer!" he muttered. "Now, I wonder if I can really remember what it was I came out here for?"

For a few moments the bewilderment continued.

"Oh, yes! Now, I know," he laughed. "I am after some of that savory herb for the soup."

It was necessary to retrace his steps considerably, and to go in a somewhat different direction. At last he came upon a patch of the herb.

"This stuff has been burned by the sun," he said to himself, turning away from the first specimens of the herb. "Over there in the shade it will be fresher and greener."

Dick took a few rapid steps, halting before a fringe of bushes. Bending over, he extended a hand to pick some of the herbs.

Just then he heard a slight sound, like the catching of someone's breath. Starting, Prescott raised his head just a trifle, to find himself looking straight into the eyes of Tag Mosher, as that youth lay flat on the ground. Two muzzles of a shotgun stared Dick in the face, while the fingers of the fugitive rested on the triggers of the gun.

"If you're looking for me," grimaced Tag, "you've found me! I'm right here, and this is going to be my dizzy day!"

CHAPTER XVI

TEN MINUTES OF REAL DARING

Still keeping his eyes turned on the fugitive, Dick took three quick, backward steps.

"Halt!" ordered Tag.

"I was going to stop, anyway," smiled Dick. "Now, put your hands up!"

"Why?"

"Because I'm boss here!" remarked Tag.

"I didn't know that you were boss of anything," Dick replied, still smiling.

"I'm telling you," declared Mosher. "Want me to make good?"

"I wish you'd make something of yourself, instead," rejoined Prescott in a voice of intense earnestness.

"Get your hands up!" ordered Tag, with a decided increase in emphasis.

"That's a silly demand on your part," Dick retorted calmly. "Why should you want my hands up? I'm not armed, and am in no position to attack you. Are you such a coward, Mosher, that you're afraid of an unarmed fellow that you could thrash even if you were unarmed? I can't bring myself to believe that of you.

"You've a mighty fine opinion of me, haven't you?" jeered Tag.

"I'd like to have a fine opinion of you," Prescott declared.

"Oh! And what must I do to win that fine opinion?" demanded Tag mockingly.

"If you want to know, I'll tell you," Dick continued. "Just put down that gun and step away from it."

"And then you'll pounce on it and hold me up!" jeered Tag. "Fine!"

"You get away from your weapon," Prescott urged, "and I'll give you my word of honor not to touch it without your leave."

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"Your word of honor?" asked Tag, driven to wonder despite himself. "What good would your word of honor be?"

"It would be as good as anything I'm capable of," Prescott responded. "Tag, didn't you ever have any respect for a man's word of honor? Didn't you ever respect your own?"

"I got that game played on me at school, once," leered Mosher. "As soon as I swallowed the bait the other fellow kicked me in the shins and ran off and left me there. Now, Prescott, I don't want any more nonsense. Put up your hands!"

"I've already declined," Dick smiled calmly. "To that refusal I'll add my thanks."

"Put up your hands, or I'll keep the gun turned on you and pull a trigger or two."

"Then the gun isn't loaded," chuckled Dick.

"Oh, isn't it?"

"No, for you're not bad enough, Tag, to shoot down an unarmed person who isn't your enemy."

"You'll tell the officers you saw me here, won't you?"

"Certainly."

"Then you're my enemy," young Mosher argued, with thorough conviction. "So you'll put up your hands, and take further orders, as long as I give 'em, or you'll be found taking a long nap on the grass here!"

"That's another wrong guess you've made, Tag."

Laughing softly, Dick dropped to a seat on the grass.

"You're a mighty sassy fellow," scowled young Mosher.

"I'm very disobliging sometimes," Prescott admitted. "For instance, Tag, I won't believe that you're half as bad as you try to paint yourself."

"Bad?" snorted young Mosher, with something of sullen pride in his voice. "I'm about as mean as they make them. You know what they say I did to that farmer?"

"Well, did you?" challenged Prescott.

"I'm not saying," came the gruff answer. "For one thing, it wouldn't do me a bit of good to deny it. When a fellow has a bad name everywhere any judge and jury will hang

him. Now, I happen to object to being hanged, or even to being locked up for perhaps twenty or thirty years. Queer in me, isn't it?"

"What you ought to do," pursued Dick, "and what you will do, if you are brave and manly, is to drop that gun, face about, and march yourself back to jail."

"And be locked up some more?" quivered Tag in excitement.

"If you're guilty of assaulting Mr. Leigh, you should be also brave and manly enough to walk back to jail, ready to pay the price of your act like a man. If you're not guilty, then you should be man enough to face the world and prove your innocence like a real man. Don't be a cowardly sneak, Tag!"

"A coward?" blurted the other angrily. "You ought to know better'n that. And the officers know better, too; I may be only a boy, but the officers are out in packs, hunting for me. I know, for I've seen two pairs of those fellows go by on the road to-day."

"Are you going to be a man, Tag, or just a sneaking coward?" asked Dick, as he rose.

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"Sit down!" commanded Tag sharply.

"If you really want to talk with me, and will say 'please,' I'll sit down," Dick smiled back coolly at the angry boy. "But if you're just simply ordering me to sit down, then I won't do anything of the sort. Do you want to talk with me?"

"Sit down!"

"You didn't say 'please.'"

"I'm not going to say it."

"Then good-bye for a little while."

Though the muzzles of the sawed-off shotgun stared wickedly at him, Dick Prescott turned on his heel, walking off.

"Are you going, now, to tip the officers off that you've seen me?" called Tag.

"Yes."

Behind Dick, as he kept on his way back toward camp there came a snort of anger. Prescott was not quite as cool as he appeared to be. He knew there was at least a chance that savage Tag Mosher would send the contents of one or both barrels of the gun into his back. Dick, however, had mastered the first secret of bravery, which is to conceal one's fear.

Again snorting, young Mosher cocked both hammers of the shotgun, Dick heard the clicks, but still walked on.

"I hate to do it!" called Tag warningly.

"Oh, you won't do it," Dick answered in a tone of calm self-assurance.

Young Prescott kept on for another hundred yards. No sound came from behind him. Unless young Mosher were creeping upon him, Prescott knew that he was now out of range of the shotgun.

Impelled by curiosity, Dick wheeled about Tag Mosher was nowhere in sight.

"Either that fellow isn't half as bad as he pretends to be, or else not half as desperate as he likes to think himself," Dick chuckled.

Then, remembering, in a flash, the herbs that he had come to get, the Gridley High School boy deliberately walked back to the spot where he had left this strange vagrant of the forest.

But Tag was no longer there—not in sight, at any rate. Bending over, Prescott collected a goodly bunch of the herbs. Then, after glancing at his watch, he started back to camp.

It was late when he returned. Dave was back from his swim, the table was set, and all was in readiness to sit down.

“Too late to use the herbs to-day, I guess,” said Tom, as Dick laid them down. “You were gone a long time, old fellow.”

“I had quite a way to go,” Dick replied quietly. Then he cut a number of grass stalks, trimming them to different lengths. “Fellows, I want you to draw lots. I don’t feel any too much like a walk to Five Corners after dinner, but if I get the short straw I’ll go.”

“No; you’d better not try it,” warned Darrin. “Your hip might begin to give you trouble before you get back. If someone has to go, let the other five draw.”

But Dick insisted that the draw should decide it all.

“What’s the matter?” asked Tom Reade shrewdly. “Have you found traces of Tag Mosher?”

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"I've seen him," Dick replied, "and talked with him. Come to think of it, I believe two fellows had better go. The two who are to go will be those who draw the shortest straws. All ready?"

Dick covered one end of the grass stalks, so that no one could be sure as to which lot he drew. The lots fell to Reade and Darrin.

"Now, tell us about the meeting," begged Hazelton.

"Let's sit down and begin to eat," Prescott proposed. "As we eat I will describe the meeting."

Plates passed rapidly until all were served. Then Dick told his chums the story of the meeting with Tag Mosher.

CHAPTER XVII

DURING THE BIG STORM

"Hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo!"

"Who's there?" cried Dick, starting up.

Then, to the accompaniment of some giggling, came in feminine tones, high-pitched, the famous battle yell of Gridley High School.

"T-E-R-R-O-R-S! Wa-ar! Fam-ine! Pes-ti-lence! That's us! That's us! G-R-I-D-L-E-Y H.S! Rah! rah! rah! rah! *Gri-i-idley!*"

"A lot of mere girls trying themselves out as real war-whoop artists!" uttered Reade in a tone of pretended disgust.

But Dick and Dave had jumped up, and were now running for the road as fast as they could.

It was ten days after the last word from Tag Mosher. The officers had been promptly notified by the messengers from Dick & Co., and presumably were still scouring the great stretches of forest, though so far without result.

"How did we do it, boys?" called the laughing voice of Laura Bentley, as Dick and Dave came in sight.

"Don't ask me!" begged Dave. "Girls never ought to try school yells. They ought to content themselves with waving handkerchiefs."



"Mr. Smarty!" cried Clara Marshall.

All eight of the girls were now in the burned clearing, surrounding the two boys laughingly, while Greg and Dan now ran up.

Out of the woods near the road came Dr. and Mrs. Bentley.

"Prescott," called the doctor, "we forgot to write and secure your permission for this latest vagary of mine."

"I don't know what the vagary is, sir, but the permission is assured in advance," laughed Dick. "What are you going to do, anyway, sir?"

"I'm afraid the idea will bore you," laughed Dr. Bentley, "but back in the road are the same two automobiles, also two two-horse wagons, loaded to the gunwales, so to speak. We've brought two small, portable houses, a couple of tents, a lot of bedding and supplies, and other things needed, and we're going to try to pitch a camp not too far from yours. Does the information convey any jar to your spine?"

"Not a jar," answered Dick promptly, standing with his hat off in the presence of Mrs. Bentley and the eight girls. "The only thing I notice in the way of sensation over the news is a great thrill of delight."

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"It's a pity that Dave and some of the other boys couldn't find their tongues and make as good use of them as Dick has just done," pouted Belle Meade.

"Dick Prescott is our captain, always," replied Darry, with a comical sigh, "and his sway extends even to the point of his bartering away our liberties."

"Let us go on, farther into the woods," urged Belle, turning to Dr. Bentley.

"I think not," replied the doctor dryly.

"Since Prescott has been the only one to hold out the gracious hand, I believe we'll settle right down here, as a reward to Prescott and as a punishment to the others."

"Hooray for punishment!" laughed Darry. "I can take a lot of it."

"That's the first nice thing you've said," declared Miss Meade.

"I'll say a lot more if you're going to be here for the rest of the summer vacation," promised Darry.

"Not quite as long as that," declared Dr. Bentley. "But we'll be here for a few days. Then we'll go on to other camping places."

"You're going to be just in time for dinner to-day," Dick informed the new arrivals.

"We'll be just in time to get our own dinner," smiled Laura. "We have an abundance of supplies with us, and we're not going to eat you boys out of the woods. The first meal with guests will be when you come over to our camp and take revenge for the descent that we made upon you the other day."

"Dick," inquired the doctor, "where do you think we could pitch camp best?"

"It depends upon the size of your houses and tents," Prescott answered.

"Naturally. Your answer is a good deal more sensible than my question."

"Anyway," Dick suggested, in an undertone, "your camp should be just far enough away so that neither camp will intrude on the privacy of the other. I think I know a spot, if your houses are not too large."

Dr. Bentley mentioned the sizes of the two portable houses.

"The spot that I have in mind will do finely," Dick declared. "And I think you can drive the wagons in there."

Dan Dalzell was sent to the road to instruct the teamsters to drive in at the point which young Prescott mentioned.

It was not long before the two wagons were at the spot. Reade now remained at the boys' camp, to look out for things, while the other five went over to the new camp to be of assistance.

Dr. Bentley, having removed his coat, was now busily at work. The two wagons were unloaded of a host of things, after which the teamsters started, at once, to erect the portable houses. As these were of a pattern requiring but little work, they were up within a few hours.

Dick & Co. pitched the tents, also busying themselves in various other ways. Now, Mrs. Bentley, aided by the high school girls, started in to prepare the noon meal.

"We shall want you boys over here about tomorrow noon," said Laura. "By that time we shall be all to rights and ready to act as hostesses."

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"Can't we come over again before to-morrow?" asked Dick, with a wistfulness that caused a general smile.

"If you don't come over except when you're especially sent for," declared Miss Meade, "you'll wake up some morning in the near future and find us gone on to the next camping place."

Dick had already told Dr. Bentley of the fugitive, Tag Mosher, and the fact that that young offender was at large in the woods, and armed.

"I'm not afraid of him," declared the doctor bluntly, "and I shall always be within sound of the camp. It wouldn't take you boys long to get over here, either, at need."

Dick now reluctantly called his chums away, as Mrs. Bentley and the high school girls might want a little time to themselves.

"It's going to be great to have such company right at hand," declared Darry gleefully.

"Only I must warn you of one thing," retorted Dick.

"What?"

"You remember the errand that brought us into the woods?"

"Football training!"

"Exactly, and even the welcome presence of the girls mustn't be allowed in the least to interfere with the serious and hard work that we have ahead of us for the honor of good old Gridley High School!"

"That goes, too," nodded Greg. "Though I am afraid the girls will feel almost neglected."

"No, they won't," Darry retorted. "The girls all belong to Gridley High School as much as we do, and they're just as big football boosters when it comes to that. They'll endure a little neglect when they know it's for the honor and glory of our school."

"Besides," suggested Dick, "they may be glad to put in a little time watching us train."

There will be no objection to that, will there?"

"Not a bit," declared the others.

Tom Reade, having been left in charge of the camp, had also taken upon himself the preparing of the dinner, though this was not his day for such service. The others now turned to help him.

"I'm glad the girls have come, and I'm also sorry," declared Reade. "If we stick to training as conscientiously as we ought to they'll feel that we're not showing them all the attention they've a right to expect."

"We won't neglect training," Dick retorted, "and the girls won't feel neglected, either. We've talked that over on the way here, and we'll explain it to the girls when we see them again. They're Gridley High School girls, and they're sensible."

It was not long ere dinner was ready. Six famished boys sat down at the table.

"I wonder what on earth is the reason that we haven't heard from Mr. Hibbert, or from the Blinders agency, either?" spoke Dick, when the meal was half over.

"I had almost forgotten about those parties," Tom rejoined. "Not hearing from Hibbert, as I take it, means that that generous young friend of ours has broken off communication with the Eagle Hotel in Gridley. But I can't understand why the agency hasn't communicated with us in some way."

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Dinner was eaten in quicker time than usual. Dick and Dave, perhaps some of the others, felt a secret desire to slip over to the other camp, but no one mentioned any such wish. Instead, the dinner dishes were washed, the cooking utensils cleaned, and the camp put in a very good semblance of order.

"In forty-five minutes more," remarked Prescott, glancing at his watch, "we must be back at training work."

"Not to-day," replied Tom.

"What's the matter?" demanded Dick, looking sharply at him.

"In forty-five minutes more," exclaimed Reade, "we'll be sitting inside the tent, looking out at the weather."

"What are you talking about, Tom?" asked Darry.

"Read your answer in the skies," retorted Reade.

Though none of the other five boys had noticed it, the sky had been gradually clouding. The wind was becoming brisker, too, and there was more than the usual amount of moisture in the air.

"Pshaw! That's a shame," muttered Dick.

"I wish we might arrange it with the weather clerk to have it rain at night, after ten o'clock, and have dry ground in the day time," sighed Dave Darrin.

Yet none of the boys spoke the thought that was uppermost in more than one mind—the wish that they might go over to the Bentley camp to spend the time that it rained in the society of the girls.

It was Reade, who was perhaps less attracted by girls' society than the others who finally suggested:

"We ought to send someone over to the other camp to see if they are all fixed to stand the coming rain."

"Good idea!" nodded Dick. "You run over, Tom."

Reade was away less than ten minutes.

"Dr. Bentley says they'll be as snug as can be in the biggest kind of a summer rain that the weather clerk has on tap," Tom reported.

Flashes of lightning were now illuminating the gradually darkening sky. Distant rumblings of thunder also sounded.

"I hope it won't be much of a thunderstorm," sighed Dick. "Some girls are very uneasy in a thunderstorm."

"Laura is afraid of one, I know," said Dave.

In a few minutes more the big drops of rain began to fall. Soon after swirling sheets of water descended. Dick & Co. had all they could do to keep dry in such a downpour.

"This is where the portable house has the advantage of a tent," grunted Tom. "The portable houses yonder are even equipped with some kind of rubber roofing. If this storm keeps up through the night at this rate, we'll be washed out long before daylight."

"I can stand it," retorted Prescott, "as long as I know that Mrs. Bentley and the girls are protected from the weather. Yet I won't mind if the storm does let up after an hour or two."

Conversation ceasing, after a time, all but Reade and Dalzell got out books to read from the slender stock of literature that they had brought with them into the woods.



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The heavy storm made it a dull afternoon, where there might have been so much fun.

But not one of Dick & Co. had the least idea of the excitement in store for them. The storm held more than rain for many people.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. PAGE'S KIND OF FATHER

As though the heavy downpour did not sufficiently indicate that the storm was still raging as heavily as ever, Harry Hazelton went to the tent doorway to peer out at the sky.

Just as suddenly he ducked back again.

"Hist!" he called. "There's someone at our canned goods stock, and I think it's Tag!"

In a twinkling Dick and Dave were by Hazelton's side. The heavy rain supplied a curtain like a light fog.

"I think that's Tag!" muttered Dick. "We'll go after him."

There was a quick diving into rubber coats. Dick and Dave were first to get outside.

But the figure seen through the rain was already under way, heading away from the tent. This figure, just as it stole under the great trees, turned to point a sawed-off shotgun their way.

"That's Tag," muttered Dick. "Come on; we'll catch him."

"Yes; if he'll kindly permit us to get close to him," rejoined Darry, as he ran at Dick's side.

Evidently the figure ahead had made a successful raid on the food, for he carried a gunnysack, and that appeared to have a load inside.

"We can catch him—if we can run fast enough," declared Dick, for just then the fugitive darted ahead with renewed speed.

"Unless he stops us with the gun," objected Dave.

"Don't let him stop you with that. I don't believe he would dare use it on us."

"If it's only a question of 'daring,'" responded Dave, "I don't believe there is anything that Tag Mosher would be afraid to do at a pinch."

Owing to the storm it was dark in the great woods. Shadows were deceptive. Though Dick and Dave ran on at pell-mell speed they presently came to a sudden halt, looking inquiringly at each other.

"Which way did that fellow go?" demanded Dave.

"Blessed if I know," Dick admitted.

"Are we still on the right trail, and merely a mile behind him?"

"I wish I knew even that," admitted Prescott.

"We might as well go back," proposed Darry. "In these woods all we'll get is—wet."

"All right," nodded Prescott. Discouraged with the chase, they turned to retrace their way nearly half a mile through the soggy, dripping woods. They had not gone far on their return when they came upon Tom and Greg.

"Hello, where have you fellows been?" asked Reade.

"We weren't very far ahead of you," Dick answered.

"Greg and I didn't see or hear you ahead."

"And Tag Mosher was just as invisible and unfindable to us," laughed Dick, "so we came back."

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"I'm growing disgusted," muttered Dave, "with the stupid way that we let that fellow carry off all of our property. It begins to look as though we ought to camp in one of our own back yards, where our parents can keep a watchful eye over us and protect us!"

There could be no doubt that Darry was completely angry. Had he encountered young Mosher at that moment he would have "sailed into" the thief with his fists, regardless of any consequences that might follow.

"Well, shall we go on hunting for him?" demanded Dick.

"It's just as Darry says," offered Tom, "I'm willing to remain out in this weather if Dave wants to."

"Oh, what's the use?" grumbled Dave. "That fellow knows the woods a hundred times better than we do, and he has made his get away. Did you leave anyone back at the camp?"

"Dan and Harry are there," nodded Tom.

"We may as well join them," sighed Dave. So the party headed toward camp.

Just as they stepped out into the clearing, they sighted a rubber-coated party of three men entering the clearing from the direction of the road.

"Why, that must be our friends, Hibbert, Colquitt and Mr. Page!" announced Prescott, halting, then running forward. "They must have gotten our note at last. Oh, Mr. Hibbert!"

The three travelers waved their hands. Then it was the oldest of the trio who ran at top speed in an effort to reach Prescott quickly.

"My boy!" panted Mr. Page, seizing Dick by the shoulders. "You have found him? We received your note this morning, and have been breaking the speed laws ever since in our effort to get here. My boy! You know where he is! Perhaps he is now one of your own party? You have told him, and have kept him here against my coming?"

"No, sir; he's not here just now," Dick answered, shaking his head. "But come into the tent, sir. There is a lot to tell you."

"I can hardly contain myself to wait for the news!" cried the eager father tremulously.

Nevertheless, silence was preserved until the tent had been entered. Mr. Page, Hibbert and Colquitt were given seats on camp stools, some of the boys finding seats on empty boxes.

“Now, my boy—my son! Tell me all about him,” pleaded Mr. Page. “Is he well? Does he know that I am looking for him?”

“I have hinted to him,” Prescott answered, “that he is not the son of the man whom he has grown up to regard as his father. I have told him that you were looking for him, and-----”

“Oh, my boy!” cried Mr. Page. “Was he pleased—or even curious?”

Prescott swallowed hard, twice, and did some rapid thinking, ere he went on, with all faces turned toward him:

“Mr. Page, if this boy turns out to be your son-----”

“Describe him to me—minutely!” ordered the father.

Dick fell into a personal description of Tag Mosher. Others, as they now watched Mr. Page closely, felt that Tag must be his son. The description, as to complexion, features, hair and eyes, all tallied closely with Mr. Page’s own appearance.

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"Now, don't keep me in suspense any longer," begged Mr. Page. "Take me to him, that I may help decide for myself."

"If he is your son, sir," Dick went on solemnly, and hating his task, "I am much afraid that you are going to be disappointed in him. The boy is known as Tag Mosher. He believes a dissolute, drunken, thieving fellow named Bill Mosher, who is now in jail, to be his father. Tag is himself a wild young savage of the forest, and maintains himself by st——poaching."

"If this young man is, indeed, my son," murmured Mr. Page, his eyes glistening, "how fortunate that I am about to come up with him! He will have no need to steal hereafter. He shall have comfort, protection, proper training at last! But where is he? Why are you keeping me from him? How long since you have seen him?"

"Only a few minutes ago," Dick answered. "He had just robbed our food supply. We pursued him, but lost him in the woods."

"Then these woods must be scoured until the boy is found!" cried Mr. Page. "Colquitt, this is a task for you. Employ as many more of your force of detectives as you may need, but you must find the boy without an hour's delay."

"I must tell you something else, sir," Dick went on in a distressed tone. "Even for my own peace of mind I must have it over with as early as possible. Mr. Page, the boy is now roaming the woods armed with a shotgun and a revolver. He is a fugitive from justice."

"What is that you say?" cried Mr. Page, his face growing haggard and ghastly. "My boy——my son——a fugitive from justice!"

"He may not be your son, sir," broke in Tom Colquitt.

Then the whole story came out. With it Dick described the birthmarks he had seen on Tag when the latter was at the swimming pool.

"That's my boy——my son!" declared Mr. Page. "And, oh! To think of the fate that has come upon him. Wanted, perhaps for homicide!"

Then suddenly the flash of determination returned to the father's eyes. He rose, stood erect, and went on:

"If he is my son, he needs guidance, aid——protection of such rights as he may still have left. Above all, he must surrender himself and go back to face the laws of the land like a man! If he has done wrong, he must bow to the decision of a court, whatever that may be. If this boy is my son, I will see to it that he does all of this. If he is not my son, then-----"

"Then you will do well to drop him like a piece of hot metal," interposed the detective quietly.

"Silence!" flashed Mr. Page. "If Tag Mosher is not really my son, then I will stand by his last spark of manhood as though he were my son, and in memory of my own boy!"

"If you will permit me," proposed Tom Colquitt, "I will go back to the road, get into the car and order your man to drive me to the county jail. There I will see old Bill Mosher, and drag the truth out of him. What Mosher has to say will be to the point."

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"Go, by all means!" pleaded Mr. Page, who had now sunk down into his seat trembling.

"And I'll go with him," declared Hibbert, jumping up. "Cheer up, my old friend, and we'll find out all the facts that there are to be learned. We'll be back here as speedily as possible."

The hours passed—hours of rain at the camp. It was a deluge that kept all hands in the tent, though even that place was wet. A pretense of supper was prepared over two oil stoves. Mr. Page made an effort to eat, but was not highly successful.

The hours dragged on, but none thought of going to bed. At last quick steps were heard outside.

"That must be Colquitt and Hibbert!" cried Mr. Page, starting up, trembling, though he soon recovered his self-control.

"Don't go out in the rain. Wait for another moment, sir," begged Dick, placing a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Do you think I could wait another minute?" demanded Mr. Page excitedly. Then he darted out into the downpour.

"Hibbert, is that you?" he screamed.

CHAPTER XIX

SEEN IN A NEW, WORSE LIGHT

"It's Hibbert," was the reply from the darkness.

Then two figures came tramping through the rain, over the soggy ground, next splashing into the tent, the flaps of which Dick and Harry held aside.

As they came in Mr. Page almost tottered toward them.

"Well," he demanded impatiently. "What did you learn?"

"I guess the boy is yours, Mr. Page," Colquitt answered. "Bill Mosher told us a pretty straight story. He found the child at the railway wreck, and he and his wife took it home, expecting that parents or friends would soon claim it. Bill says his wife was a good woman, and, when no one claimed the boy, she kept it and loved it as her own. Bill admits that his part in the transaction was due to the hope of receiving a reward. After his wife died, Bill, it seems, went to the dogs, followed his naturally shiftless bent, and, from a common vagrant, became a drunkard and common thief. Yet Bill claims, with an

air of a good deal of virtue, that he never stole anything he didn't really need, and that he brought Tag up the same way."

Mr. Page, white-faced and trembling, listened to the detective's dry recital.

"You have taken pains to find further verification of the fact that this unhappy boy is my son, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes," the detective went on. "Bill described with great minuteness the clothing the child wore when found, even to the embroidered letter 'p' on the underclothing. And Bill tells me that his sister has kept that clothing ever since, in the hope that something might come of it. The sister also has two pictures of Tag, taken when a baby."

"Where does that sister live?" cried the father. "Take me to her home at once!"

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"She lives in another state, some four hundred miles from here," smiled Tom Colquitt. "Mr. Page, I advise that you find the boy, first. There isn't any real doubt as to his being your son. You had better wait for further proofs until after you have found the boy—who, according to all accounts, stands badly in need of a real father just now."

"You are right—quite right," admitted Mr. Page. "Yes, we will find my son first. But tell me something more. Didn't the boy know that Bill Mosher wasn't his real father?"

"No; it had never been hinted to him," Colquitt answered. "Bill kept the truth from the child, and, after Bill's wife died, they moved over into this part of the country, where no one knew their past history."

"And has my son never been in school?"

"Oh, yes; the compulsory education law came to the rescue, and the boy had a grammar school education before he took to the woods altogether."

"I know something definite, at last," sighed the unhappy father. "I know that my boy is alive, and that he needs a father. Moreover, I feel certain that he is at this moment not far away from me. What shall we do next? Did you wire for more detectives from your agency?"

"There was no need to do so," Colquitt replied. "There are several officers now looking for the lad, and they are certain to come upon him. Hibbert and I will aid in the search. The chauffeur will bring in four folding cots and some blankets. We shall have to impose upon these young men for shelter to-night, as this is the point from which we must take up the chase in the morning."

At least one man in the tent lay with eyes wide open all night, and that was Mr. Page. By daylight the rain had stopped. The sun came up, drying the ground in the open spaces, raising a semi-fog under the big trees as the moisture steamed up. It was a close, humid morning, yet all rose so early that breakfast had been eaten before six o'clock.

Then Mr. Page's party went away in the automobile, on some errand of their own.

"I wonder how the girls got through the rain last night?" mused Dave Darrin.

"They must have gotten along all right,"

Dick replied. "They had two dry houses in, which to sleep."

"I've a good mind to go over now, and make some inquiries," Dave pursued. "Will you come with me?"

"No, and I'd advise you not to go, either. Six in the morning is too early to call on young women."

"That's so," Dave assented. "What time should we go over?"

"As this is camp life, I should say it might be all right for us to drop over there soon after nine o'clock," Dick said slowly. "How does that strike you?"

"If that's too early," pondered Darry wonderingly, "then we might go within sight of the camp, as if looking for firewood, but not go over to them unless we get a hail."

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"That would be a subterfuge," Dick replied, shaking his head. "Straight dealing is always the best rule in anything."

However, Dr. Bentley settled the question of etiquette himself, by coming over to the boys' camp shortly after eight o'clock.

"Mrs. Bentley sent me to see if you got through the night without being drowned," smiled the physician.

"We look pretty healthy, don't, we, sir?" smiled Dick.

"Speaking professionally, I would say that you do," agreed Dr. Bentley. "However, I believe you must have had a pretty dismal time in all that downpour. Have you been in the woods this morning? They are pretty wet, aren't they?"

"The woods are damp, sir," Prescott answered, "but not really wet. The water has soaked fairly well into the ground since sun-up."

"Are the woods dry enough for a little botanizing?" asked the doctor. "Laura and Belle say they have a few plants in mind that they want to add to their collection of botanical specimens. Are you two young men ready to escort them?"

"Certainly, sir," Dick nodded. "And the forenoon will be the best time, as we must go through our training work this afternoon."

"Hang my luck!" muttered Darrin in sudden disgust. "This is my day to do the cooking here."

"One of the other fellows will take your turn," suggested Prescott.

"I won't ask anyone to do it," sighed Darry. "I'm man enough to shoulder my own share of the camp work. Dick, you can look after both girls, can't you? And you'll make my excuses satisfactorily to Miss Meade?"

"That's right—just right, David," spoke the physician. "Do your own work like a man. I'll undertake to make your excuses so well that Belle will have a higher opinion of you if that were possible. Dick, shall the girls look for you within the next few minutes?"

"I'll be there soon, doctor."

Five minutes later Dick presented himself at the other camp. He went first to Mrs. Bentley and inquired as to her comfort during the storm.

"We know Dave can't come, but where are the other boys?" inquired Clara Marshall.

“Over at the camp,” smiled Dick.

“Don’t they think that we need attention?” asked Susie Sharp.

“Tom is hauling firewood,” Dick explained. “Greg is chopping it up. Harry is hauling the water supply and Dan is doing the housework in the tent.”

“Laura and Belle have an escort for their trip into the forest, but it’s not a rosy outlook for the rest of us,” Clara pouted.

“Can’t we all go together?” proposed Dick. “Surely, one guide ought to be enough for a party of eight girls.”

Susie decided to join the botanizing party. The other girls made up their minds to take a walk under Dr. Bentley’s escort. So Dick started away with the trio.

Belle and Laura carried the regulation oval cans for holding such plant specimens as they might collect. Prescott promptly offered to carry both cans, but the two girls declared that they were not going to permit him to impose upon himself.

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For fifteen minutes the young people went on, farther into the forest. Though the girls wore overshoes, Dick went ahead to pick out the drier paths.

Collecting botanical specimens, though interesting to amateurs or experts, is dull work for onlookers. As both Belle and Laura were enthusiastic workers, Dick found himself walking chiefly with Susie Sharp. There was much waiting while Laura and Belle dug their mosses and plants.

Finally, Dick and Susie found themselves standing together, some feet from Laura and Belle, who were gathering wild flowers.

"Look at those beautiful purple blossoms over there!" cried Susie in sudden enthusiasm.

"Are you going to turn collector, too?" smiled Dick.

"To the extent of wanting a bouquet of those flowers," Susie declared. "Will you help me?"

"With great pleasure. If you will wait here, I will get the bouquet for you. It will take me hardly a minute."

Dick started away alone. By the time that he had picked a good-sized handful, Susie started to meet him. For the moment she was out of sight of the other girls.

Dick came toward Miss Sharp, holding out the gorgeous blossoms.

"Will these be enough?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes! Thank you so much!"

"It was a very slight service," Prescott laughed. "I am glad to have pleased-----"

A sudden scream brought his gallant speech to an abrupt stop.

"Oh, Dick! Be quick!" sounded the voice.

"Pardon me," said Prescott to Susie, as he sprang forward through the brush.

It was a startling scene that met the high school boy's gaze as he bounded forward.

Tag Mosher, holding his shotgun under his left arm, stood confronting Laura and Belle. In his right, hand he held a gold chain and locket that he had snatched from Laura



Bentley's neck. In one of his pockets, out of sight, now rested two valuable rings that he had forcibly stripped from one of Belle's hands.

"Sorry, girls," he was saying. "I never did anything quite as bad as this before. But if you knew how badly I need to get away from these parts you'd know why I'm holding up girls to get money to pay my fare, and-----"

Just then Tag Mosher caught sight of Dick Prescott.

"Stand back!" warned Tag hoarsely. "I don't want to have to do anything worse than I've just done. Stand back, or by the blue sky-----"

CHAPTER XX

SOME IMITATION VILLAINY

"Oh, Dick, do keep back. He won't harm us further," cried Laura.

Prescott ran forward by leaps and bounds.

"If you will have it-----" growled Tag, cocking both hammers of his ugly weapon.

Laura uttered another scream, then, with sudden frenzy, seized the barrels of the gun.

"Let go!" yelled Dick, racing up. "If he fires, even accidentally, you'll be killed."

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"Then let him put down the gun," panted Laura without releasing her hold.

Belle seized Tag by his right arm, hanging on frantically.

But Dick, reaching the spot, laid hands on the shotgun.

"Let go, Laura," he commanded sternly. "I have hold of this gun."

It was the tone of the high school boy, not her own fear, that made Laura Bentley obey.

"Let go of his arm, Belle," Dick insisted. "You girls get back out of harm's way."

"I won't let go," Belle insisted. Then she resorted, excusably under the circumstances, to the somewhat feminine trick, of pinching Tag Mosher's arm sharply.

That started the real fight. Dick tripped the bigger fellow, and the pair went down together as Belle leaped back.

Click! click! sounded both descending hammers of the sawed-off shotgun. For an instant—Prescott's heart was in his mouth, for he knew something of the wicked scattering power of such a weapon, when discharged, and he feared for the girls.

The next instant, however, his common sense told him that the hammers had descended harmlessly. By desperate force he wrenched the piece out of Tag's hands, hurling it away.

Laura's locket, and chain falling to the ground, Belle darted in and rescued them.

"He has my rings in his right-hand coat pocket," Belle announced.

"He'll give them up, then!" predicted Dick grimly, making a dive for that pocket. He was on top, in the mix-up, and secured the rings, tossing them toward Belle. Then Tag, by a violent effort, hurled Prescott from him and rose, ready for battle.

But Dick landed close beside the sawed-off shotgun, which he snatched from the ground as he rose to his feet.

"You cur!" said Dick. "Robbing girls!"

"I hated to do it," growled Tag, looking somewhat shamefaced. "But I've got to have money to get away from this corner of the world. The deputies are out after me, and they'll get me yet, if I stay here."

With a quick movement Dick threw the gun open at the breech.

"It isn't loaded," Tag informed him grimly. "This is the piece of iron that holds cartridges."

From a hip pocket he brought a heavy, long-barreled revolver into sight.

"You can't scare me with firearms," declared Dick doughtily. "Nor are you going to rob these young women, who are my best friends."

"I'm not going to try again," announced Tag. "What I want is for you to keep away from me, and not follow me. If you do—well, you can guess the answer! Now, as I'm going, give me that gun."

"I won't," Dick declared firmly, holding it by the muzzle and ready to employ the weapon as a club.

"You'll make a lot of trouble and danger for yourself and the girls if you don't put the gun on the ground and walk away from it," warned Tag, glowering.

"I won't drop the only weapon that I have," Dick returned firmly. "You could down me easily unless I had something like this to swing. As long as these young women are under my protection I will not give up the only weapon that I have."

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"If I press the trigger of this pistol," challenged Tag, "will you be able to offer the girls much protection then?"

"Perhaps not," Prescott rejoined. "But shooting me will be the only way that you can get this gun from me."

There could be no doubt that the high school boy meant just what he said. Tag, who was not accustomed to wasting time in crises, turned angrily on his heel.

"Hold on there a moment," called Dick. The other boy baited, turning about. "Do you remember what I told you the other day?" demanded Prescott.

"You've told me a lot of things I never took from any other kid," growled Tag.

"Do you remember what I told you about your father, his love for you, and his desire to meet and claim you?"

"Old Bill Mosher's love?" laughed Tag harshly. "I'd stay and laugh a while at that, but I've other business for to-day."

"No; your real father, Mr. Page!" Dick cried after him, as Tag started away. "Bill Mosher found you in a railroad wreck. Your real father is a man of wealth. He is nearly broken down from the many anxieties of trying to find you. He spent last night at our camp. This morning he and friends of his started off to find you. Tag, come back here, and I'll take you into camp."

"No, thank you!" leered the larger boy. "I've been taken into camp before, and you're the lad that turned the trick. You turned me over to Valden and Simmons, and they turned me over to the warden at the jail. I'm not going back to that jail—*alive!*"

"You foolish fellow! Can't you understand?" bellowed Dick, following Tag as he once more turned away. "I'm telling you the truth, and your father is only too anxious to employ all his wealth in protecting whatever rights you may have. Bill Mosher was seen at the jail yesterday, and he admitted that you were not his son, but that he found you as a baby at a railroad wreck! Tag, use your brains, for once, and come back to camp to meet your father!"

"Good-bye!" laughed the larger boy derisively, increasing his fast walk to a run.

Desperately, Dick Prescott followed. As Tag sprinted, so did the high school boy.

Looking back, young Mosher tripped over a root, and fell heavily. The revolver flew from his hand landing several feet away. Prescott was now so close that Tag sprang to his feet and ran on without making any effort to recover his lost weapon.

Then the larger boy dived into a thicket. He did not appear again. Master of every hidden path in these forests, he seemed likely enough to get away without leaving a trace of a trail.

Dick halted, brought to his senses by the realization that he had deserted the three high school girls who had been entrusted to his escort. He turned about. At the spot where Tag had tripped he bent over to pick up the abandoned revolver.

One glance into the cylinder was enough. There wasn't a cartridge in the weapon.

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"Just as I thought," laughed Dick triumphantly. "Tag had no notion of shooting anyone. For fear he might do so, if too closely cornered, he threw away the ammunition. He relied on the bad reputation of the Mosheres to make officers hesitate if they encountered him with firearms in his hands."

Then Prescott called for the girls, whom he quickly rejoined.

"You didn't catch him?" asked Laura.

"Not I," laughed Dick. "He knows every trail in these woods and in a sprint, Tag Mosher could leave me hitched to a tree."

"I'm thankful you didn't catch him," quivered Miss Bentley. "He's a terrible fellow."

"Is he?" laughed Prescott good-humoredly. "As a bad man Tag Mosher, or young Page, as he really ought to be called, is about the biggest bluff that I've ever heard of. Look at these weapons. Both unloaded. Yet, when Tag broke jail, he carried away ammunition enough to hold a company of militia at bay. Tag doesn't want to shoot anyone. All he wants to do is to scare pursuers."

"He's a ruffian, anyway," Belle declared.

"Why? Was he very rough with you?" Dick inquired. "Did he tear your rings off recklessly, and hurt your hands?"

"No; but he held my hand so firmly that I simply couldn't pull it out of his clutch," Belle replied. "Then he took off my rings as easily and in as matter-of-fact way as though they were his own property."

"He really didn't mean to hurt you," Dick explained. "He has been trained, from babyhood, to make his living by appropriating other people's belongings, and he was only obeying his training. The officers are after him, and Tag, not wishing to be caught, wants to put considerable distance between himself and these woods. Yet no matter what he does, or where he goes, the officers will finally find him. Law is supreme, and triumphs in the end. No man may defy the police and courts of a nation and get away with it for any great length of time."

"Would you have tried to catch him, if we hadn't been with you?" asked Laura.

"Yes," Dick admitted. "Though under the circumstances I had no right to do anything but stay here with you and try to protect you. Shall we go on with the collecting?"

"If the other girls want to do so," agree Susie Sharp.

“If we want to?” Laura echoed. “After the fright we’ve had? All that we want to do is to-----”

“Get back to camp?” smiled Dick. “I’m wholly agreeable. Truth to tell, I’ve had such a fright that my nerves are shattered.”

“Your nerves shattered?” echoed Belle scornfully. “Tell that to someone who never lived in Gridley, Dick Prescott! You flew at that fellow like a tiger.”

“But look at the magnificent help I had!” smiled Dick.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MEDICAL EXAMINER TALKS TRAINING

“Do you want a suggestion, Prescott?” inquired Dr. Bentley.

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The physician and his party had been over at the high school boys' camp for something like twenty minutes, that same afternoon, watching the training work that the young athletes were undergoing.

"Yes, sir," Dick answered promptly. Then a sudden thought striking him, he added:

"Perhaps I can make a suggestion, doctor, that is even more immediate in its nature than yours."

"Then I shall be glad to have it," smiled Laura's father.

"Did you leave that chauffeur to watch your camp?"

"No; he has gone to Five Corners to post the young women's numerous letters. But the camp doesn't need a guard, does it?"

"It does, as long as Tag Mosher is at large, sir. Harry, won't you go over to the doctor's camp and stay there until the chauffeur returns?"

"Yes," agreed Hazelton.

"If you sight Tag, or any other doubtful-looking characters, just give a yell, and we'll all come over."

"Would that young scamp bother our camp, really?" inquired the physician.

"Certainly he would," Dick went on promptly. "Mosher, Page, or whoever he really is, is just as natural an anarchist as the world ever saw. He has never had anything of his own, and whenever he sees anyone else's property that will serve him, he just says, 'Tag, you're It!' That's the way he got his nickname."

"I believe I'll go over with Harry and see if anything is missing," declared Dr. Bentley. "In the meantime, Prescott, suppose you and your squad rest until I return. Just make yourselves agreeable to the girls. I'll endeavor to be back promptly. When I come back I shall be prepared to offer you some training suggestions that may be of value to you."

So the flushed young athletes rested, except Harry, who departed with the physician.

In fifteen minutes Dr. Bentley returned.

"Your warning came too late, Prescott," announced Laura's father cheerily. "Our camp has been visited."

"Tag Mosher?" gasped Prescott.

"Impossible to say," was the smiling answer. "The caller forgot to leave a card. But someone has cleaned us out of about a dozen tins of food and some packages of biscuit. It must have been quite a little load. Just by chance I also happened to think to look at my medicine case. One vial is missing therefrom."

"What medicine did he take, did you say, sir?" asked Dave Darrin much interested.

"I believe I didn't say," replied Dr. Bentley. "Perhaps later on I shall tell you."

"If the thief took only a dozen tins," said Mrs. Bentley, "there is food enough left so that we needn't worry about immediate famine. And we have two cars, either one of which may be despatched to bring further supplies."

"Tag is really going to move away from here, then," decided Dick thoughtfully.

"Why do you say that?" asked Dr. Bentley.

"Because Tag has a fine appetite, and an abundance of muscle. Instead of a dozen tins he would have taken three or four times that amount. It is only his need for traveling in light marching order that made him so moderate in the tax he levied."

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"It's only an incident," continued Dr. Bentley. "And I am glad of it. It shows that the young scamp is still in this neighborhood, and that means that there is still a fair chance of his being captured."

"I wonder why he stole one particular drug from your case?" Dick mused aloud.

Dr. Bentley smiled, not relieving Prescott's curiosity as to the name of the missing drug.

"It can't be that Tag means to commit suicide, as a last resort, can it?" Dick suggested.

"I think not," smiled Dr. Bentley.

Then the leader of Dick & Co. gave up further effort along this line to secure the desired information.

"I started in to offer you a suggestion, Prescott," continued the medical man.

"Yes, sir; it had something to do with training, I believe."

"Before I tell you what I have to say, Prescott, suppose you put each of your 'men' through the stunts they were doing before."

"Which one first, sir?"

"Any one of the young men."

"Dave!" called Dick.

Darrin stepped forward.

"One moment," said Dr. Bentley. He felt Dave's pulse, then nodded.

"Go ahead, Darrin."

Dave started in with the work.

"Speed it up!" ordered Dick. "Faster! Drive!"

Darry continued at his training work until Dr. Bentley called:

"Stop! Now, stand still, young man."

Bending over, Dr. Bentley placed one ear against Dave's chest, watch in hand, while the others looked on curiously.

“Just what I thought,” nodded the physician, looking up at last. “Prescott, you have a lot of bright ideas in training, but you’re driving your squad too hard. Darrin’s heart doesn’t come down to normal speed as soon as it should.”

“Anything wrong with the heart, sir” asked Darry.

“Nothing. It’s the trainer that’s wrong,” replied Dr. Bentley. “It is a fault with a lot of trainers without long experience that they work an athlete’s heart overtime. Darrin’s heart should have slowed down in a little more than half the time required in this instance. Set another man at work, Prescott. I can show you how to do this properly. Let the others work as hard as Darrin did. I want data to work on. Then I’ll lay down a few suggestions that will serve you well.”

This not being interesting to the high school girls, they chatted among themselves.

In the end Dr. Bentley read off some figures he had jotted down, and explained to Prescott what he must regard as a satisfactory heart performance after each bit of training work.

“Now, whenever you don’t bring your work, fairly close to these limits you’ll know that you’re overdoing the training,” Dr. Bentley explained. “If you overdo on training then you injure the chances of the men of your squad. The wise trainer keeps within limits. Keep within such limits, and you’ll find that, bit by bit, your men can endure more and more, and still pass satisfactorily as to diminishing heart speed after stopping grilling.”

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"It's mighty good of you to explain all this to us, sir," Dick protested, gratefully.

"Not in the least," replied Dr. Bentley. "You may recall the fact that I'm medical examiner to the High School Athletic Association."

"And I also recall, sir," Prescott rejoined, "that for your work with the high school athletes you accept a salary of only one dollar a year, in place of the hundred dollars that the Athletic Association offered."

"Well, if I cut prices in selected instances, that's my own affair, isn't it?" smiled the physician.

"Now, we'll go on with the training work," Dick soon announced, stepping forward. "Reade! Darrin!"

So the work went on, though it was not quite so grilling after that. The girls looked on with interest, at first, but there was no contest in hand—nothing for any "side" to win, so presently the high school girls found the spectacle less interesting.

Tom, standing by, mopping his face, turned to see that Miss Marshall, her red parasol resting over one shoulder, had strolled away.

"That was kind of Clara," laughed Tom.

"What was?" inquired Belle.

"To take that red sunshade further off. It made me perspire to look at it."

"Red silk shuts out some of the worst rays of the sun," Laura explained wisely.

"Does it?" asked Tom. "I know there must be some excuse for carrying a red sunshade."

Then suddenly he colored, remarking:

"That wasn't very gallant of me, but I didn't mean it quite the way it sounds."

"And a red parasol helps throw a little tinge of color over a face that hasn't any too much color of its own," added Susie. "Clara is always more or less pale in summer."

"She might be a lot more pale if any of those wild cattle were to roam back this way," smiled Dr. Bentley.

Hardly had he uttered the words when, from the edge of the woods, there came a piercing scream, followed by a deep, bass bellow that seemed to shake the ground.



All hands turned instantly, to see Clara running frantically, waving the parasol in her fright, while not very far behind her charged a bull, its head lowered.

“Drop your parasol!” cried Greg. “Throw it away.”

“Then turn and run in another direction!” shouted Darrin.

Neither Dr. Bentley nor Dick Prescott uttered a word. They had no advice ready at the instant, but turned and ran toward the imperiled girl as fast as they could go.

Unused to such exercise, Dr. Bentley, who got the first start, was quickly panting and red of face.

By him like a streak shot Dick Prescott, running with the speed of the sprinter.

To face the bull empty handed was worse than useless. Dick had to form his plans as he ran.

CHAPTER XXII

PLAYING RAGTIME ON MR. BULL

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“Drop your parasol! Throw it away!” screamed her friends in unison.

But Clara, emitting another shriek, seemed too frightened to comprehend. She tried to redouble her speed, but the bull was rapidly gaining on her in the pursuit.

As all stood gazing at the panic-stricken girl, Dick Prescott shot across the field.

What happened next was that Dick snatched the flaming red parasol from her hand, then swung her shoulders about, thus forcing the girl to face in another direction.

“Run—the way you’re headed!” he yelled hoarsely.

The bull was close upon them. Giving the parasol a flourish in the maddened animal’s face, Prescott started off in the direction from which the bull had come.

“Get up a tree, Prescott, as quickly as you can!” panted Dr. Bentley.

But Dick, not even pausing to shake his head, put all his effort into a fresh burst of speed.

Running away from the camp, flaunting the red parasol, Dick was followed closely by the bellowing bull. For a short distance, anyway, the sprinter could run as fast as the pursuer.

Dick swiftly decided, now that he had the bull in voluntary tow, to lead the animal where the trees were thicker. Here an agile candidate for football honors ought to be able to daze and exhaust the bull by darting from tree to tree.

The plan had its dangers, however, and Dick knew them well.

Once in among the trees Dick tossed the parasol to one side, then darted off on an oblique line.

Bellowing, stumbling, the bull turned clumsily to follow him.

Again Dick changed his course, though, purposely, he took pains not to get too far from camp.

Now he saw his chums running towards him.

“Keep away! Don’t get near the bull!” he yelled.

“We’ve sent Dan to get the rope in the tent,” Reade called back.

“Now, what in the world do the boys think they’re going to do with a rope?” Prescott wondered.

Suddenly, as he dodged off on a new track to escape the bull, a plan flashed into Prescott's mind.

"Get up a tree!" yelled Dave.

"Hardly time enough," Dick retorted, dodging again and sprinting briefly out of harm's way. "When Dan brings the rope throw it so that one end will rest in the lowest fork of that young chestnut tree."

Dave Darrin heard, understood and nodded.

"Rope's ready in the chestnut tree," he called, as Dick started on still another track, pursued, clumsily, by the angry bull.

"Get back out of harm's way," shouted Dick. "Get back, or you will hinder me."

In three changing sprints Dick manoeuvred to reach the chestnut tree, though the clumsy bull was barely twenty feet behind him and coming fast.

As the rope hung from the crotch of the tree both ends trailed on the ground. Seizing both lines Dick went up rapidly hand over hand, his feet braced against the tree trunk. In this position he was able to run nimbly up the side of the trunk.

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Bump! The bull's head landed against the tree, the shock nearly bringing the high school boy to the ground. Dick managed to hold on to the rope, though his feet slipped from the trunk.

Rapidly he drew himself up into the crotch of the tree. Bump—again! Any animal with a head less hard would have been stunned outright.

Even Mr. Bull, after the second charge at the tree, backed off, head lowered, pawing the ground, willing to consider ere making a renewed attack.

The tree was in no danger of snapping. It was too stout for that. Prescott's only danger, just at present, was that of being dislodged by the force of those mad charges.

Turning, and beholding his friends closer than was safe, Prescott shouted to them:

"Get back, fellows! You can't do any good here now, and the bull may turn on you. Get 'way back! I'll call you when I'm ready for your help."

"What do you think you're going to be able to do up that tree?" jeered Danny Grin, as he nevertheless backed away with the others.

"I'm going to do something, if there's any way to do it," Dick answered. "How is Clara?"

"Safe," pronounced Tom.

"Hysterical?"

"No; only trembling."

Dick had hauled up the rope. Now, with a speculative air, he was making a slip noose at one end. He still hadn't a very definite idea of what he was going to do to the bull. Prescott was making a lariat, though he had no skill in the use of such a thing.

Presently, however, the mad animal came closer, stamping, head lowered.

"Nice fellow! Nice fellow!" Dick called mockingly. "Wouldn't you like to have me come down to talk with you?"

Attracted by the voice, the bull raised its head, showing its flaming eyes.

"I wonder!" mused Dick, half aloud, as he leaned out cautiously over a limb. "I wonder."

Then, by way of finding out, he dropped the noose suddenly. It fell over the animal's head and around its neck.

Warned by the touch of the rope, the bull backed hastily off, nearly hauling the high school boy out of the tree.

“There’s just one chance to get you, and that’s happening now,” mused Dick Prescott, as, still holding to the rope, he fairly shot down the tree trunk.

For an instant the bull watched as though incredulous. It gave Dick time to touch his feet to the ground, passing the rope loosely once around the tree trunk.

As the bull lumbered forward Prescott pulled on his rope, while retreating in the opposite direction.

All in a twinkling the bull’s head was close to the tree, and Dick with the end of the rope in his hands, and aided by the twist around the tree, had a leverage that enable him to hold the bull there.

For a few moments the dirt fairly flew before the maddened animal’s efforts to free itself. Then, finding itself a prisoner, with its head fastened close to the tree, the bull again stopped to consider.

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"You fellows can come over here now," Dick called. "The bull is safely caught——provided neither the rope nor the tree break."

With a yell of delight Dick's chums ran to the spot. Dr. Bentley came, too, though he walked.

Dick's success did not seem destined, how ever to last. A halt and a rest seemed to give the bull strength far greater than it had used in pulling against the rope before. With an angry snort the animal dug its hind hoofs into the soil and began to back away.

"Help!" called Prescott, suddenly, for he found the rope slipping through his fingers, the friction burning his flesh. Mr. Bull had succeeded in backing four feet away from the tree. He would speedily be able to free himself altogether.

Tom and Dave now came running. They threw their weight and muscle upon the rope to hinder the captive animal. But that great creature seemed likely soon to overcome the strength of all those combined against him.

"Come on!" called Dick, backing away on a new course. "Off this way, to the next tree behind me. Hold on and pull for every pound you're worth."

Seeing his opponents plainly engaged in making some new move the wild animal halted, eyeing them balefully. That hesitation proved fatal to his immediate freedom, for Dick had succeeded in getting the rope around the tree behind him. Now he took another quick hitch, supplementing this with a knot, then another and a third.

"I guess we may all let go of the rope now," Prescott smiled. "I don't believe the bull can pull successfully against that triple knot."

Mr. Bull was trying it, at any rate. His angry bellows were almost as loud as the roaring of a lion. Dirt flew. The beast exerted its whole power in its efforts to get free.

"The knot will hold," pronounced Dr. Bentley, after a critical survey. "The great danger is friction, which may wear out that part of the rope hitched around the first tree. If that happens we shall all have to run for our lives. Come back here, Prescott! What are you going to do?"

For Dick, leaving the little group, had started on a run for the bull.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT TAG "BORROWED" FROM THE DOCTOR

"I want to see how the rope is faring," Dick explained.

"If it fares badly," called Dr. Bentley dryly, "you will find your curiosity possibly fatal. Come back here. It is time for us to be getting away. I am sorry we have no fire arms, or we could settle Mr. Bull very quickly. Come along, boys! Come, Dick!"

But Prescott, for once, didn't prove over, tractable. He went closer, anxiously studying the condition of the rope wound around the first tree. Until Dick was ready to go none of his chums would leave the scene. Dr. Bentley had turned away; but when he found himself unaccompanied, he wheeled about once more.

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"You can't do anything—except run in danger, Dick," the physician called anxiously.

"I am studying this business trying to find out if there isn't something that I can do," Prescott replied.

"There isn't," Dr. Bentley assured the boy, walking over to him, "and by staying you're only putting your life in almost certain jeopardy."

But Prescott shook his head and went on studying the turn of rope around the tree trunk.

"You foolhardy fellow, I wish I had authority to order you away from here," exclaimed the physician irascible.

"I know you think I'm foolhardy, sir," Dick answered respectfully, "but, from the way the rope is fraying, this beast is going to be free presently. I feel that I simply have to find a way to prevent his doing mischief. We boys can take to trees, but how about the girls? How about Mrs. Bentley?"

"They can get inside of the wooden houses at need," urged Dr. Bentley. "It is hardly likely that even a crazy bull would attack a wooden house."

"He might charge through our camp, though, and frankly, doctor, we can't afford to lose that camp," Prescott argued.

"You other boys get back!" commanded Dr. Bentley, but Dick's chums came closer.

"Hoo-hoo! hoo-hoo!" sounded a masculine voice from the direction of Dick & Co.'s camp.

"Hoo-hoo!" Dick answered, in his loudest tone. "Who are you?"

"Hibbert," came the reply. "I understand you are bull chasing!"

"Yes."

"Want any help?"

"Yes; if you're an expert in handling wild bulls," Dick shouted back, between his hands.

"I guess that will hold him, for a little while," chuckled Dave. "The idea of Hibbert handling wild bulls with those dainty little white hands of his!"

Soon the sound of running steps was heard. Then on the scene came Hibbert, carrying a second rope that he had found.

"A queer hitch-up you've got there," murmured the dapper little man, as he halted near the group.

"Yes; and the bull is going to get away pretty soon, according to all predictions," replied Tom Reade. "Though, perhaps, Mr. Hibbert, you may have an idea that hasn't occurred to our addled brains."

"That's hardly likely," murmured the young man, as he began to tie a running noose in one end of the rope with an air of preoccupation. "I don't know very much about cattle."

"I suppose not," Tom nodded.

"The very little that I know about the beasts," Hibbert went on quietly, "was what I picked up during my college vacations, when my good old Dad sent me west to rough it on a ranch. I'm not a cowboy at all, you know. All I know about them I discovered merely by sitting in saddle and watching the cowboys."

Now Hibbert slipped around to the rear of the bull, which, for the moment, was behaving very quietly.

"Look out!" yelled Prescott suddenly, for Hibbert, slipping in closer, had begun to tease the beast's left quarter. Mr. Bull, as though resenting such familiarity with all his force, reared, plunged, snorted. The rope hitched about the tree seemed likely to snap at any moment.

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Just as the bull came down on its hind legs, its forefeet raised in the air, Hibbert made a swishing throw.

“Hurrah!” broke swiftly from the onlookers, for the dapper young man had made a throw that had roped the animal’s forelegs together. Hibbert made a sudden haul-in on the rope, with the result that the bulky beast crashed sideways, falling.

Then, all in a twinkling Hibbert leaped in, hobbling the thrown beast effectively. Having done this he made a few knots in the rope with workmanlike indifference.

“Now, the beast won’t run about very fast, if he get’s up,” remarked Mr. Hibbert, rising from his task. “For that matter, I hardly believe he’ll get up.”

Hibbert next busied himself with gathering in the rope that Dick had used. Cutting this off beyond the point where some of the strands had become frayed, Hibbert made a new cast about the bull’s head, then tied that animal effectively to the tree.

“Fixed the way he now is,” remarked Mr. Hibbert pensively, “I believe Mr. Bull, unless he has human aid in freeing himself, will still be here when the meat inspector gets around.”

“For a man who knows nothing about cattle,” said Tom Reade, breaking the silence of the on-lookers, “it seems to me that you’ve done a most workmanlike job with that bull.”

“To an amateur like you or me,” admitted Hibbert modestly, “it looks like a very fair little tie-up. But I’m afraid my former friends on the Three-Bar-X would feel decidedly ashamed of me. Shall we now go back to camp, or were you intending to go further into the woods?”

“I believe we’d better go back to camp,” said Dr. Bentley. “You didn’t come alone, did you, Mr. Hibbert?”

“Oh, no, indeed,” replied the dapper little man. “Mr. Page and Colquitt are waiting back at the camp.”

As the party came in sight of the camp the women were plainly still agitated.

“We’ve treed the bull!” shouted Dr. Bentley. “At least, I mean, he’s safe.”

“He’s been safe all along,” cabled back Mrs. Bentley. “But are we safe, too?”

“The bull is roped so that he will do no harm,” Dr. Bentley answered. “None of you need feel the least uneasiness now. The work that young Prescott started so well Mr. Hibbert has finished satisfactorily. The bull cannot get loose and do you any harm. He will stay just where he is until some of the local cattlemen come along to take care of him.”

Just before dark, it may be added, two of the tenders employed by the owners of the cattle were stopped in passing. They led the bull away, the animal's legs being partly hobbled.

"You haven't seen my boy," remarked Mr. Page wistfully, as Dick and his chums reached the space before the tent.

"I am afraid we hardly expected to see him again, sir," Prescott answered. "As you've doubtless heard, sir, your son has been back this way, and visited Dr. Bentley's camp. From there, I take it, he meant to make his escape out of these woods for good and all. I have an idea, Mr. Page, that a further hunt will lead far away from here."

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"My son ought not to be able to get far away," went on the father, holding out a handbill. "I have felt obliged to proclaim a reward of a thousand dollars for the boy's discovery within a week, with a further thousand if it happens within three days, and still another thousand for his being brought to me within twenty-four hours."

"Then you can expect results, sir!" Dick went on, brightening. "Money talks, I've heard."

"And talks in every language," added Reade. "Mr. Page, a lot of men who are not police or peace officers will be out hunting for young Mr. Page. 'Tag Mosher' will be more eagerly sought for than ever before in his life."

"I don't see how Tag has a ghost of a show to get away," observed Dave Darrin.

"Whew, but I'm thirsty," remarked Dr. Bentley, going over to the spot where the drinking dipper hung. "And it looks as though it were my turn to go after water."

"Is there no water there?" Prescott inquired.

"Not a drop."

"Then I'll get some water, doctor," offered Dick, coming forward and taking up a pail.

He went briskly away to the spring where the boys obtained their water supply. The spring was some distance from camp. Dick reached the little glade where the spring lay, and turned down into it. As he did so he saw a movement of the bushes, as though some animal had crawled into shelter.

"Anyway, it wasn't anything as large as a bull," laughed Dick, as he bent over the spring, bucket in hand. He filled the bucket, then set it down on the ground.

"I wonder what is under those bushes?" he muttered, boyish curiosity coming to the surface.

Prying the bushes apart, stepping forward, he suddenly halted, a cry of astonishment coming to his lips.

"You, Tag?" he questioned, in astonishment, gazing down at the sullen face of the larger boy who lay on his back in the thicket.

"Yes; it's Tag, and I'm It," mocked the other.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you to call your friends, the officers. There's a reward offered for me, I suppose."

"Yes; there is," answered Dick, wondering why Tag didn't leap up and scurry away. "And guess who offers the reward?"

"Who?"

"Your father!"

"Bill Mosher?" laughed Tag, despite his sulky air. "What does Bill offer? The next dozen of eggs?"

"Tag, Bill Mosher isn't your father, and he has admitted it. You were a strange child that came into his care, and he kept you, at first, hoping for a reward. Your real name is Page, and your real father is now over at camp. I'll call him."

"You may as well," agreed Tag sullenly. "But Page is a new name. Is that what they call the sheriff now?"

"Tag, aren't you ever going to be serious?" demanded Dick, flushing with eagerness.

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"Not while you go on springing the same old line of fairy tales on me," retorted the other lad. "Is my father, as you call him, as rich as he was yesterday and the day before? Has he still barrels of money that he's waiting to hand me? Money? Humph! If it hadn't been for money I wouldn't be in the fix I am now. Prescott, I'll tell you something. I've kept the cupboard full by stealing. I'll admit that. But I never stole money before to-day. I went through those dog-houses—what do you call them?"

"Do you mean the portable houses of the Bentley party?" asked Dick.

"I guess that's the right name. Anyway, I went through those houses to gather in some food, for I was going to leave these woods for good and all."

"So I guessed," nodded Dick.

"And I came across two twenty dollar bills. Prescott, I've always helped myself to food, because, some way, it always seemed to me that food belongs to the fellow who needs it most. But I had never taken any money, before, from anyone. That's honest—flat! But the twenties looked fine to me. They would carry me a long way on the railroad, and I haven't had any notion to stay here and go to jail for something I didn't do anyway. So I took the money, the grub, too, and stepped off fast through the woods. But, Prescott, you may believe me or not, that money got heavier with every step. Remember, I've never had any practice in stealing money. By the time I'd gone three or four miles that money in my pocket got so heavy that I couldn't drag my feet another step. I took the money out and threw it away. But that didn't help me any, either, so I went back, found the money, and started back this way to put that money back where I got it. I never knew that anything I helped myself to would grow so heavy, but back I had to come with that money. I can't understand what made me feel that way about a little money. Maybe it was"

"Conscience," suggested Dick promptly.

"Conscience?" repeated Tag wonderingly. "What's that? I know I've heard that word somewhere—some time."

Dick was wondering how to make sure of Tag this time. If he shouted to his friends in camp Prescott felt positive that Tag would leap up, knock him down and glide away. Give him a start of a hundred yards in these forests, and Tag Mosher, otherwise young Page, was quite certain to distance and elude all pursuit.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

As a last resort the high school boy decided to make one more effort to use persuasion.

“Tag” he urged, “be a real fellow. Show some grit, and purpose. No matter what you've done, or what you haven't done, show that you've sand enough to get up and walk back into camp with me—to meet your father. Come, get up and come along, like a real fellow with real grit, won't you?”

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"Get up?" echoed Tag bitterly. "If I could, do you suppose I'd be lying here talking to you now?"

"Are you hurt?" cried Dick.

"If I hadn't been, do you suppose I'd have stayed with you as long as I have?" mocked the other indignantly. "It all came of that money, too, and what you call 'conscience.' If I hadn't come back with the money I wouldn't have had that nasty tumble over the root, and my ankle would be as sound as ever."

"Do you mean that you can't walk?" Dick demanded.

"I can crawl, and that's all," Tag declared. "I was at the spring, getting a drink, when I heard you coming. Then I crawled back in here, but not fast enough to keep you from seeing something moving here. It was right over yonder that I fell and wrenched my ankle. I crawled over here so as to be near water until my foot got so that I could use it again."

"Hoo-hoo!" bellowed Prescott, through his hands. "Hoo-hoo the camp! Hoo-hoo!"

"That's right," jeered Tag. "Go in after the reward, when I can't help myself. Serves me right for taking money when I should have contented myself with my old game of stealing victuals only!"

"Hoo-hoo the camp!" repeated Prescott. "Hoo-hoo!"

"That you, Dick?" came in Darrin's voice.

"Yes; come here on the jump, Dave. And bring the others."

"Where?"

"At the spring."

"Say," remarked Tag shrewdly, "you oughtn't to call a whole crowd that way. There will be more to get a share in the reward, and you won't get as much for yourself."

"Oh, bother the reward!" spoke Prescott impatiently. "All I'm thinking of, Tag, is the bother you've given us, first and last."

"I suppose I always have been a trouble to folks," Tag assented glumly. "But I'll be game—now that I'm caught."

All the chums save Hazelton came on a run.

"Here's Tag, fellows," Dick hailed them. "He has hurt his ankle and I guess we'll have to carry him to camp."

"That'll be easy enough," declared broad shouldered Tom Reade. "I believe I can pick, him up alone."

Tom tried. The feat would have been possible, but it would not make for the comfort of the injured boy.

"You and I will make a queen's chair," suggested Dick. Then Dave, Greg and Dan lifted Tag to the seat thus formed.

"You'll find me heavy before you get me far," Tag informed them.

"Pshaw!" retorted Tom.

Greg, running ahead, informed the others in camp who was coming. The bearers were met by Mr. Page, Hibbert and Colquitt, running in the order named.

"Here's the boy you want, Mr. Page," called Dick Prescott. "But look out for his injured ankle, sir."

This last caution was necessary, for the older man, in his eagerness to embrace the lad whom he believed to be his son, almost crashed into him.

"So you're my son—my boy, Egbert!" cried the father.

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"That's the fairy tale that has been shied at me a good many times lately," replied Tag gruffly.

Mr. Page fell back, in some astonishment, at this ungracious reception. Then, understanding, and remembering Tag's unhappy past, he patted the boy's shoulder.

"That's all right—all right, Egbert," declared the father. "Perhaps the news has come upon you too suddenly. But you and I will talk it over. It won't take us long to know each other, my boy."

As the party came into camp it was noted that Mrs. Bentley and the girls had withdrawn, returning, through delicacy, to their own camp. Hazelton, thus released from guard duty at the other camp, soon came running over.

But Dr. Bentley had slipped into the tent, quickly arranging one of the cots with the skill of the hospital worker.

"Bring the young man in here," called the physician, appearing in the doorway of the tent. "We'll soon find out how bad the injury is."

Tag was lowered down upon the blanket.

"Which foot is it?" asked Dr. Bentley.

"Left," replied Tag.

Dr. Bentley deftly removed the shoe, causing hardly more than a trace of pain. Tag insisted on raising himself on his elbow to look on. It was the first time he had ever been under a doctor's care.

Dick took one look at the wistful eyes of the father, as Mr. Page stood by the head of the cot, resting one hand on his supposed son's shoulder.

"Come outside, fellows," called Dick. "Doctor, we'll be outside if you want anything."

The onlookers in the tent started to go outside, except the father and the physician.

"Come back, Hibbert," called Mr. Page softly. "You've been at least a son to me during the last year. Now, remain and help me to get acquainted with my own son."

Tag was silent. He could take punishment, and Dr. Bentley was now hurting him quite a bit in his effort to get at the exact nature of the injury.

"Reade," called the physician, "start a fire in a hurry. Heat half a kettle of water for me as fast as you can. Prescott, run over to my camp and ask Mrs. Bentley for my

emergency case, the two-quart bottle of bicarbonate of soda and a roll of four-inch gauze.”

Dick sped toward the Bentley camp as though on wings. While Mrs. Bentley was gathering the things for him the girls crowded about, asking eager questions about Tag, or Egbert Page, as he might prove to be. But Dick delayed to talk only until Mrs. Bentley had placed the desired things in his hands. Then he sped back, in time to hear the physician saying:

“Only a sprain. A painful one, to be sure. But this young man may be moved in an automobile in an hour or two. By to-morrow morning he ought to be able to get about with the aid of a crutch.”

“In jail is where I’ll do my moving about,” grunted Tag.

“No matter where it be, my boy,” protested Mr. Page, “if they lock you up they’ll have to take me, too. Besides, I have money, and bail is possible.”

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"Bail?" repeated Tag. "Would you go my bail, and trust me not to jump it?"

"The Page honor would never permit you to jump bail," replied the old man, with simple but positive belief in his tone.

Hardly had Dr. Bentley finished dressing and bandaging the ankle than a new arrival appeared. Deputy Valden had dropped in, alone, to discover whether there was any news.

"You may wait, deputy, and go with us," declared Mr. Page, as though the sheriff's officer were some subordinate of his. "We will go to the jail as soon as my son is rested and is comfortable enough to be moved."

"Humph! I like that!" jeered the deputy. "This boy is my prisoner, and I'll take him when I please. See here, Tag, I don't want you faking any injuries as a slick way to-----"

"You get outside, my man!" broke in Detective Colquitt quietly, but he took hold of the deputy so forcibly that Valden was quickly on the outside of the tent.

"Now, you come along with me, my man," Colquitt continued, "and I'll tell you who's who. First of all, this boy is Mr. Page's son. Mr. Page can produce all kinds of money merely by signing a check. He is indignant with you, already, for maltreating his son when you had him under arrest at another time. Mr. Page may employ lawyers and bring proceedings to have you ousted from your job by the sheriff. You-----"

Here their voices died out in the distance, but Valden went along willingly enough. When the pair returned the deputy seemed to have lost his swagger.

"Doc, you've been good to me," said Tag at last, "and now I'll tell you how I came to hurt my ankle. You know, of course, that I visited one of your shacks and helped myself to some of your kitchen stuff. While I was there I came across a queer little black bag. I opened it, and found a whole lot of queer little bottles. Medicines, I guess, though I don't know, for I never had any. Then I came across one little bottle that I couldn't see inside of. I took out the cork, and inside I found some paper rolled up and tucked away. Two twenties were what I found. Money was just what I needed, to buy a railway ticket with, so I slipped the money into a pocket. Then I started off, but, Doe, that money got so heavy---so awfully heavy-----"

From there on Tag repeated the story he had told young Prescott. During the recital Dick had stepped into the tent.

"I knew you had my money, my boy," smiled Dr. Bentley, "but I didn't say anything about it."

"You didn't start off to put the officers on my track?" demanded Tag incredulously.

“Not I,” laughed Dr. Bentley. “I had a different idea. I suspected you’d buy a railway ticket. This evening I had intended to drive, to a telegraph station and telegraph about until I found where and to what station a chap answering your description had bought a ticket. Then I would telegraph to the sheriff just where you were to be picked up as you left the train. I’ll admit that I wasn’t very anxious to turn you over to the law. What I wanted was to get on your trail, and then see you turned over to your father.”

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"You told me that Tag took a drug from one of your vials," Dick murmured, smiling.

"So he did," nodded the doctor. "Money is a drug in the market—in some places."

"What kind of places, sir?" Prescott inquired.

"Such places as the United States Treasury, for instance," laughed Dr. Bentley. "Or the National City Bank of New York."

Then turning to Mr. Page, the physician completed his explanation.

"Money is a strange thing perhaps, Mr. Page, to carry in a vial in a doctor's drug case. But sometimes, when I've been on the road, and a long way from home on the day's work, I've found that I needed money just when I least expected to want it. So, for some years, I've always had two twenty dollar bills tucked away in an opaque vial, where it would not be seen and invite theft. I never told anyone what I carried in that vial."

What Dr. Bentley did not explain, however, was that, generally, when he wanted extra money, it was for some charitable work the need of which became apparent when he was visiting the sick and needy. The generous physician had many "free patients."

Some two hours later, Tag, his father, Hibbert, Colquitt and Valden started for the county jail in the big Page car. On the way they stopped at the home of Farmer Leigh, to which Dr. Bentley had gone ahead of them.

"Mr. Leigh is conscious and able to be seen," the physician reported to Detective Colquitt. "Bring your prisoner inside at once."

Then there came a dramatic surprise. Farmer Leigh, when confronted by Tag, positively denied that Tag was the one who had assaulted him. Mr. Leigh, it will be remembered, was a newcomer in the neighborhood. He had never known Tag, but, after his injury, and before brain fever came on, the farmer had described his assailant, and that description had seemed to fit Tag Mosher to a dot. The real criminal, however, a young tramp some years older than Tag, was found later on, and punished according to law.

Dick Prescott was the only one of the high school boys on hand to see the clearing of Tag of the accusation against him. Dick had come along in Dr. Bentley's car.

"Prescott," whispered the physician, "slip downstairs. You'll find my car all ready. All you need to do is to press the starting button. Drive over to Porterville and get Mr. James, the district attorney. Never mind if you have to drag him out of bed and thrash him into submission—bring him here as quickly as possible. Don't fail, you understand."

With heart beating rapidly, but feeling wholly happy, young Prescott slipped downstairs and out of the house. A few moments later he was speeding over the lonely country road. At one o'clock in the morning he came back with District Attorney James, who heard Farmer Leigh's statement, reduced it to writing and had it signed under oath before many witnesses.

"Officer Valden," said the district attorney, "I authorize you to take your prisoner to Porterville, not to the jail, but to the Granite Hotel. As soon as court opens in the morning I will secure the formal discharge of your prisoner."

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This was done. Dick, who returned to camp with Dr. Bentley just before daylight, did not see Tag released, but heard of it.

Proof came in rapidly after that to satisfy Mr. Page that "Tag Mosher" was his son Egbert. Best of all, even young Egbert himself was convinced.

Young Page underwent a speedy and complete reformation. Later he went to school to prepare for college. In time Egbert promises to be a strong man in his community and a force for good. Old Bill Mosher died soon after leaving jail.

Mr. Page tried hard to make Dick & Co. accept the offered reward of three thousand dollars, but neither the boys nor their parents would listen to any such transaction. Dick & Co. had done their duty in manly fashion, and that was reward enough.

Dr. Bentley's party broke camp a few days later. Dick & Co., however, remained for several weeks, training hard, putting on tan and muscle and fitting themselves to compete for places on the famous Gridley High School eleven in the coming fall.

Just what happened to our boys in the school year that followed will be found fully and thrillingly explained in the third volume of the "*High School Boys Series*," which is published under the title, "*The High School Left End; Or, Dick & Co. Grilling on the Football Gridiron.*"

The further vacation doings of these splendid American boys will be found in the next volume of this "High School Boys' Vacation Series." The book is published under the title, "*The High School Boys' Fishing Trip; Or, Dick & Co. in the Wilderness.*" Our readers will find it a story full of rousing incident, persistent adventure, delightful humor and absorbing human interest.