

g Five Motorcycle Boys in Tennessee Wilds, or, The Secret of Wa

Ralph Marlow

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The Big Five Motorcycle Boys in Tennessee Wilds, or, The Secret of Walnut Ridge

Ralph Marlow

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CHAPTER I. THE RIDERS OF THE MILE-A-MINUTE WHEELS.

"BETTER bring your motorcycle in under the trees, Hanky Panky, with the rest of our machines."

"Sure, Rod, I mean to do the same, after I get rested up a bit. That last run up-hill and down, was a swift one, believe me."

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"But say, did any of you notice *me* turning a flapjack on the way; or taking one of my old-time headers; tell me that?"

"No, Rooster, you've struck your gait, all right, it seems, and away down in old Tennessee at that, where the going ain't such great shakes to boast of."

"Thank you, Josh; I'm doing my level best. But Elmer warned us before we started on this trip to the South, that we'd likely have some hard bumps to knock up against."

"It was a ride on velvet, though, coming down through the Blue Grass country of Kentucky, near Lexington; own up to that, suh!" said the boy who seemed to be the Elmer in question; and whose voice had the indescribable musical quality that so frequently marks the native born son of Dixieland.

"That's all right, Elmer, but we've sure paid up for it, after climbing all sorts of hills, and polishing through bad roads ever since. My arms are sore with holding my machine in the middle of the track, and that's as true as my name's Josh Whitcomb."

There were five of the wanderers, all boys of about the same age; and as a rule sturdy of build, as though accustomed to outdoor sports that go to bring the hue of health to the cheeks.

Besides Josh Whitcomb, who seemed to be a rather impatient sort of a chap, there was Roderic Bradley, to whom the rest looked up to as a natural born leader, Elmer Overton, the Southern lad already mentioned; the one called "Rooster" by his chums, and whose real name was Christopher Boggs; and last of all, a nervous fellow going under the queer nick-name of "Hanky Panky," when at home he was registered on the roll of the high school as Henry Jucklin.

One of his favorite pastimes was the practice of the Black Arts; for Henry aspired to be a magician, and already, in the estimation of his admiring chums, he could vie with the famous wizard, Hermann, in sleight of hand, freeing himself from ropes that had been wrapped around him and knotted; and all such things calculated to bewilder the average mind.

When he dazzled some of his mates with his expositions of transforming a handkerchief into a pocket-knife; or restoring one that he had apparently burned right before the eyes of the owner, he was accustomed to using certain phrases in which the words "hanky panky" occurred, and by degrees the boys had corrupted his former nick-name of Hank into this queer "handle."

These five lads belonged in the thriving town of Garland, situated not far from the center of the State of Ohio. Those who read the preceding volume of this series, and have thus already made their acquaintance, will recognize old friends in the owners of the up-to-date motorcycles that had been brought to a stop in this wild region of Tennessee.

For the benefit of any new readers it may be only fair to relate how these lads came to possess such costly toys, worth possibly a couple of hundred dollars each.

During a flood, when the river that ran past their home town was on a boom, they had discovered the wreck of a house floating down the swift current, and upon this was a man, frantically waving his arms, and calling for help.

The boys had succeeded in rescuing the one who was in deadly danger, and who proved to be a rich old recluse named Amos Tucker, who, soured with the world for some reason or other, had lived almost alone.

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Perhaps his nearness to death may have aroused the old man, and caused him to look at things in a different light; for to the great astonishment and delight of Rod and his four chums, there had come a notice one day that if they called at the freight station of the railroad they might each of them take away a splendid motorcycle that had arrived from the factory, charges all prepaid.

Of course they quickly suspected who had sent these wonderful presents, and upon interviewing the rich old man in his new home found that sure enough he had discovered how it was a dream with the boys to some fine day own such a machine for spinning over country roads; and in order to partly pay back the debt he felt he owed them, he had sent for the five latest models in motorcycles.

Nor was this all, for in the bank he had deposited to the order of Rod Bradley the magnificent sum of a thousand dollars, which was to be drawn upon from time to time, as their expenses for the care and maintenance of their machines, or a desire to take trips abroad, warranted.

When good fortune starts coming it often pours, and so it happened that Rod and his friends had been chiefly instrumental in following a pair of precious rogues who had broken into, and robbed the Garland bank, only a couple of weeks previous; and not only securing their arrest, but returning the stolen securities and cash intact.

For doing this they received a reward of five thousand dollars, which was split evenly with a farmer named Bijah Spruggins, who had rendered them great assistance in making the round-up.

So it may be readily seen that their treasury was full and overflowing, and that when Rod proposed they accompany their chum, Elmer Overton, who was bent on taking a flying trip down through Ohio and Kentucky, to his old home not a great distance from Chattanooga in southern Tennessee, every one of the others agreed to the plan, without a dissenting murmur; indeed, they were fairly wild about it, even Rooster, who was the poorest rider of the lot.

Possibly a word of explanation may not come in amiss regarding that strange cognomen that had been fastened upon the Boggs boy. Whenever Christopher felt in a happy frame of mind, or his team had accomplished something worth while, he invariably slapped his hands against his thighs, to make a sound like a rooster that has flown up on the upper rail of a fence flapping its wings, and then he would proceed to give the finest imitation of a crow ever heard. Under the circumstances it was a foregone conclusion that his schoolmates would quickly forget he ever had such a name as Christopher; and from that day until the end of the chapter he must answer to the suggestive one of "Rooster."

They had not attempted anything like great speed while on the trip. Indeed, save when passing over those fine roads in the celebrated Blue Grass country in Central Kentucky such a thing would have been practically impossible; for as a rule they passed over very poor thoroughfares, where it seemed next to a miracle that the clumsy rider, Rooster, had not come to grief more than once.

Up to now they had managed to strike a town or village when night came on, and so found accommodations at a tavern. But this promised to be an experience of a different character; for Josh had discovered something wrong with his machine, that would necessitate immediate attention; and when Rod proposed that they camp out for a change, every fellow eagerly agreed.

They had come prepared for such an undertaking in-so-far as having the means for gratifying their desire for food went, though without tent or blankets. But then the weather was warm, and they could keep their camp-fire going, if they felt disposed.

And so Rod had halted them near a little stream that gurgled along the side of the road, and which promised to supply water for their coffee. Each one had something securely hidden away in his bundle that, when brought to

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light, seemed to promise a fairly decent supper.

"Here's the coffee-pot, and inside of it a package of the best Java we could buy in old Cincinnati as we came through!" called out Josh, as he started to undo his package.

"And this frying-pan looks like it just wanted to get busy right away with these slices of fine juicy ham!" echoed Rooster.

Each of the others announced the finding of certain articles of food, which were placed near where the fire had already been kindled by Rod.

Soon the scene was a bustling one, with each of the boys trying to do what they could to hasten the cooking of supper all but Josh, who was kneeling alongside his motorcycle and apparently starting to get to work remedying the fault that had been giving him anxiety.

"Say, this is about as lonely a place as ever I saw," remarked Rooster, who was perhaps somewhat more timid than any of the others, though no coward, when it came right down to it.

"And we'd better keep some sort of watch to-night, I should say," declared Hanky Panky, as he tossed five apples up in the air, and kept them spinning in an endless procession from one hand to the other, until they seemed to be a part of a wheel.

"Because," went on Rooster, "them woods look like they might harbor a wildcat, or p'raps a moonshiner that'd take a fancy to our wheels."

"Which, the wildcat or the mountain-dew maker?" asked Elmer, laughingly.

Rooster was about to make some sort of witty reply, when suddenly a gruff voice which thrilled them through and through, called out:

"Every one of ye hold up yer hands right smart, now! I got ye kivered with me gun, and don't mean to stand for no nonsense. Hold 'em up, I tells yuh. 'Spect we-uns down hyah don't know revenues, w'en we sees 'em? Quick now, er I'll low tuh open up on yuh!"

CHAPTER II. ONE BOY WHO MADE GOOD.

"OH! we're up against it already!" exclaimed Hanky Panky, as he hastened to comply with the orders of the unseen disturber of their peace, almost dislocating his arms in the effort to lift them as high as possible.

"Don't shoot, Mister; we give in!" called Josh, who was also apparently doing his best to accommodate; while he twisted his head around, to see what the rest of his companions were about.

Rooster was incapable of uttering a sound, except what seemed to be a deep groan; but that did not prevent him from elevating his hands in the most approved style. And both Rod and Elmer had also complied with the demands of the hidden moonshiner, who had accused them of being government spies; though they looked considerably surprised that he failed to show himself.

It was indeed a queer sight, and no wonder that Josh chuckled aloud when he saw how literally the others had complied with the gruff command.

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"Who's that snickering?" suddenly demanded the suspicious Hanky Panky; "By the great horn spoon, it's Josh Whitcomb! Oh I tell you what fellers, he's been and fooled us again with his old ventriloquism. There ain't no moonshiner around at all; and Josh he's gone and made us look like thirty cents!"

At that both Elmer and Rod burst out laughing, which would indicate that they may have suspected something like the truth all along. Rooster just rolled over on his back, and kicked his heels in the air in positive relief; for he had really been shivering with anticipations of something dreadful about to happen.

Hanky Panky made a dash toward the tricky Josh, but the latter easily eluded him, and sought safety behind an adjoining tree, until the righteous indignation of the other had simmered down to mere sarcastic remarks, when he once more ventured to come back to his job of examining the inner workings of his motorcycle.

In times gone by Josh had displayed considerable skill in the art of throwing his voice, and then for a long spell seemed to have given the thing up; but he had been practicing in secret, and acquired such success that he anticipated having considerable fun from this time on, amusing his chums, and creating consternation in the breasts of such ignorant persons as they might run across in the course of their travels.

Now that they had been duly warned, the other boys would not allow themselves to be taken in so easily again. They were apt to keep an eye on Josh whenever they heard a voice, without seeing the speaker. But the amateur ventriloquist secretly promised to make things interesting for Rooster and Hanky Panky from time to time, as he had numerous scores to wipe out.

"I move we dock Josh half his supper because of that scare!" suggested Rooster, now fully recovered; though from time to time he would glance apprehensively about at the darkening woods around them, when he thought none of his comrades might be observing.

"Not much you do!" volunteered the one in question; "I'm hungry enough to fight for my rights. One-fifth is all I claim, and that I'm going to devour. I promise to be good for the rest of to-night, only don't you dare cheat me out of my grub. I'm reformed, you see, and mean to shed all my bad ways after this till the next time."

"Like fun you are," jeered Hanky Panky; "when a feller gets going like you are, and playin' hob when the notion strikes him, he never reforms."

"That's all you know, Hanky Panky," spoke up Josh, quickly; "look back a bit and you'll see a shining example of the same right at our door. Remember Gid Collins, don't you; and didn't Rod here make him see the error of *his* ways? Say, did Gid make good or not, tell me?"

The one addressed shrugged his shoulders, and felt forced to admit that Josh was right.

"But then Gid was an exception to the rule," he grumbled, shaking his head as he continued to watch the coffee-pot, which was beginning to emit strange noises, as if to give due warning that the contents had now reached a point pretty close to the boiling stage, and would have to be plucked quickly off the fire in order to keep the precious amber juice from surging over the top.

"Well, so'm I an exception," remarked Josh, calmly; at which there was a general laugh.

"I'll never forget," Elmer went on to remark, as he handled the frying-pan; "that day Rod went with me to the Collins cabin, with that basket of fine food sent by his grandfather who used to go to school with little old Mrs. Collins, and who felt sorry to learn how poorly off she was with a sprained ankle. Gid just glared at us, and wouldn't accept the basket for the longest while, because he thought Rod had a card up his sleeve. But believe me, suh, he just had to give in when Rod handed him his cap, and told him he had picked it up near our boat-house,

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which some one had tried to burn the night before. He just stared and stared, and couldn't find his tongue, and so we left him."

"And then, just three days afterwards it was Gid who stopped that runaway bull in the streets of Garland, when the crazy old beast was just going to dash into a pack of frightened little children on the way to a picnic," Rod went on to say.

"I happened to be where I saw what he did, fellers," Hanky Panky burst out with, "and you c'n take it from me, it was well worth watching. He just pulled out his old red bandanna, Gid did, and jumpin' in front of that savage bull, waved it right before his eyes. Course the animal turned from the little children, and rushed at Gid; but he jumped to one side, and then danced in front of the bull again; all the while yellin' at the top of his voice for the little tots to run, and get inside a gate close by. Yes—siree, Gid, he kept up them there gymnastics, in a way to beat a bull-fighter over in Spain, till every one had skipped out. Then he ran and leaped over a fence hisself, and put his fingers on his nose to the old bull, through the palings. And after that some men came along and shot the savage beast that had broke loose from the stock-yards down at the railroad. Whee! I never *will* forget what I saw even if I did climb up a tree myself!"

"And," Josh went on to say in turn, anxious to break in; "when Rod here heard about that, he went and insisted on shaking hands with the worst boy in Garland, and telling him how proud everybody felt of him. Yes, and they took up a purse too, and presented it to Gid right in the presence of his old grandmother, that he's always taken such care of, even when he was the toughest fellow in town. And say, she looked the proudest little old woman you ever saw, as she put her arm around Gid's neck, and says that she always *knew* he was a good boy, even if some people did like to run him down."

"But one thing you can depend on, boys," remarked Rod, seriously; "Gid Collins will never be the same bad egg in the future he has always been in the past. He's turned over a new leaf, and I'm satisfied that my plan was a wise one, when I went to him that day, gave him back his cap, and as much as told him that now the only evidence of his being the one who tried to burn our club-house had been destroyed. It set him to *thinking*, and he woke up."

"Yes," said Elmer, nodding his head sagely, "and when your bitter rival, Oscar Griffin, wants any of his mean work done after this, he'll have to look for another tool than Gideon Collins; because the last I heard, Gid had taken a position with the Armour Grocery Company. Little Lucy Armour was one of the tots that might have been trampled and gored by that bull, only for what Gid did. And let me tell you, boys, I'm ready to knuckle down to Rod every time when it comes to knowing how to handle tough customers like Gid Collins was."

"Huh! wish he'd get busy then, and make Josh here behave," remarked Rooster; "because, now that he's got that talking through his hat business down to such a fine point, I c'n see heaps of trouble ahead for the rest of us. Talk to him, won't you, Rod. I know he's just aching to make us believe there's all kinds of ferocious wild beasts hanging out around our camp down here, and wantin' to devour us."

Josh chuckled, but put his right hand up solemnly, as though ready to declare himself entirely innocent of the charge; but Rooster evidently did not wholly trust him, for he frowned, and shook his head.

"Supper's about ready, fellows!" announced Rod just about then; and this welcome tidings caused the others to forget everything else in the overwhelming desire to satisfy the demands of their vigorous appetites.

Indeed, the odor of the cooking ham, and the boiling coffee, not to mention the sight of the sandwiches and other things, which had been disclosed in various packages stowed away in the bundles, had long before now aroused the anticipation of the hungry boys to the limit.

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And so they squatted down around the spot where the prepared food had been placed, every one anxious to assist. Each fellow carried a tin platter, and a cup of the same material, as well as knife, fork and spoon, so that in a brief time they were busily engaged in devouring their portions of the supper.

Of course they talked while they ate, and there was quite a clatter of tongues, despite the fact of their mouths being full much of the time.

"Well," remarked Josh, all at once, "would you believe it, here's Hanky Panky dropped back into his same old careless ways again, always promising to do things, but forgetting all about it a minute afterward."

"What ails you now, you old grumbler?" demanded Hanky Panky, reaching out for another roll, with which to finish his coffee.

"Why, all of us heard Rod here tell you to fetch your machine up with the rest, alongside; and you said you'd sure do it when you got your breath; yet there she stands, leanin' against that tree, by the road yonder, just like you left it when you threw yourself down to get your breath back."

"Oh! is that what's paining you, Josh?" demanded the other, as he scrambled to his feet, with the tin cup in one hand, and a roll in the other; "well, for fear you throw a fit, and spoil the whole trip, I'll just meander over there and coax my machine to trundle back here where it belongs. I'm the most obliging feller you ever saw, barring none."

"Bully for you, Hanky," called out Rooster; "but why don't you show us some of your magic, and make the motorcycle start this way all by itself? Oh! my goodness! fellows, I do believe he's adoin' that same! Looky there, you c'n see it amovin' all by itself! But hi! hold on there, Hanky, you've gone and started it the wrong way; for don't you see, it's movin' off *down* the road!"

Hanky Panky was himself staring as though he thought he might be dreaming. Then all of a sudden he dropped his cup and roll, as he started to run in the direction of the moving motorcycle; and at the same time he bawled at the top of his voice:

"Rod! Elmer! Everybody, come quick, and help me ketch him! Robbers! Thieves! Stop that black coon from getting away with my machine! Oh! hurry, hurry, somebody, and get after him; for there he's jumped in the saddle, and is riding away!"

CHAPTER III. HANKY PANKY MYSTIFIES HIS CHUMS.

IMMEDIATELY what had been a peaceful scene became one of wild commotion. Hanky Panky was running uncertainly after his disappearing motorcycle, while the rest of the boys had jumped to their feet, to stare at the strange spectacle.

But there was at least no longer any mystery about what was taking place; for all of them had seen the ragged figure of a darky manage in some fashion to gain a seat in the saddle of the moving motorcycle, and start to propel it, with his feet on the pedal.

And then four fellows made a lurch forward, as though every one had conceived the same notion at once which was to jump on their own machine, and start an immediate pursuit.

Rod realized the folly of all of them going, when the chances were they would only get in each other's way, and have a spill; so he immediately called out:

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"Only Josh come with me; the others stay in camp, and look out for trouble too!"

He had mentioned the name of Josh simply because that individual happened to be nearest to the wheels, and could throw himself into the saddle quicker than any one of the others.

It was almost dark, and before starting Rod would have liked very much to get his acetyline lamp going, so as to see what dangers might lie in store along the downgrade of the poor road; but there would be no time to accomplish that; and so he had to take the chances.

With a whirr both motorcycles shot away, Josh crouching in the saddle like an educated ape in the circus; and with Rod just behind him.

"Keep as much to the left as you can, Josh!" called the other, as they found themselves spinning down the grade; for he was sticking to the right side of the road himself, and this rendered the danger of a collision less likely.

They saw Hanky Panky leap out of the road to allow them free passage. He seemed to shout something after them, but neither could make out the sense of what the owner of the stolen motorcycle said.

Of course they had eyes only for possible perils on the road, and what might lie ahead of them. And in a very brief space of time they glimpsed a moving object which could only be the runaway motorcycle with its black rider.

Both boys started to shout, thinking to thus alarm the thief, and cause him to relinquish his plunder.

Evidently the racket did have some such effect, for he was seen to slow up, and jumping from the motorcycle, vanish in the woods that bordered the road just at that point.

"Whee! that was a hot little chase, all right, Rod!" exclaimed Josh, as the two of them came to a halt alongside the abandoned machine, which lay on its side, just as it had been thrown when the alarmed thief jumped off.

"Just what it was," replied the other.

"And I certain sure hope now nothing ain't been broke about Hanky's wheel, when it went down with such a crash?" Josh continued, anxiously.

"Oh! I guess not," the other reassured him by saying; "they make motorcycles in a way to stand up against all sorts of hard knocks. Couldn't do anything else, you know, because they're apt to run into trouble any time. But keep an eye out in case that slick rascal tries to jump at us. We'll trundle all the wheels back, till we meet up with Hanky, who can take charge of his own property."

"Listen! sounds like something of a row back there, because the fellows are hollerin' to beat the band!" exclaimed Josh, with a tremor of excitement in his voice.

"Just what I thought might happen," remarked Rod; "and that was why I told Rooster and Elmer to stay there. That sly thief had a partner, and they thought it'd be easy to raid our camp if the whole lot of us ran after Hanky. But it didn't work as easy as they expected. The boys have chased him off, seems like; because there's our Rooster, crowing as loud as he can."

"And here's Hanky after his wheel," remarked Josh. "Now we can start up, and spin back to camp in a jiffy. Take hold, Hanky, and I hope you find her O. K. right side up with care. But you deserve to lose it, after being so lazy and careless."

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The three of them in rapid order started to speed back up the gentle grade, and in quick time reached the spot where the fire gleamed. They found Elmer and Rooster guarding things, each with a heavy billet of wood in his grasp, and walking around as though doing sentry duty.

"Whee!" exclaimed Rooster, who when excited was apt to get very much mixed in his speech, so that his chums were accustomed to solving some of his remarks much as they might a riddle, or a rebus, in the puzzle column; "the woods is full of 'em, sure's you're born, fellows! Why, before you'd gone two minutes another black coon came jumpin' out of the bushes here, and wanted to carry off our good grub and other stuff. Me'n Elmer we grabbed up these sticks, and made him skip out in a big hurry, believe me!"

"A regular scheme to clean us out, all around, I do believe," exclaimed Josh, as he glared around him, as though daring any more of the would-be thieves to show their black faces.

"But we saw something that struck us as mighty queer, suh!" remarked Elmer, with a serious look on his dark face.

"What might that be?" asked Josh, eagerly.

"Why, the ragged fellow who tried to steal the rest of our grub had on striped garments, even if they were faded so you'd hardly see the fact; and from that, suh, I believe these two must be escaped convicts, either from a camp where they have been working on the roads, or else some penitentiary in Southern Tennessee."

"But I thought it was only down in Alabama, Georgia and Florida that they hired out convicts to turpentine-still men, and the like?" remarked Rod.

"Perhaps that is so, suh," the Southern boy went on to say; "I don't pretend to say what the rule is in Tennessee just now; but I do know that they work the convicts on the roads. And believe me, these two must have escaped from the gang. It sometimes happens, though they are generally chased, and recaptured by the guards."

"Then we've just got to keep guard all night," Hanky Panky observed, as he mopped his wet forehead; "and watch our things, if we don't want to find ourselves afoot in these wild regions. I just felt it in my bones we was goin' to run up against something like this down here; and now it comes along."

But presently he seemed to have fully recovered from the fright the sudden appearance of the two black convicts had given him. His machine was safe in the center of the "park" made by the grouping of the motorcycles; and he had ascertained that, beyond a few scratches, it was none the worse for the recent adventure.

It was hard indeed to keep the spirits of Hanky Panky down, he was such a lively fellow most of the time. The crackling of the camp-fire appeared to stir him to showing off some of his accomplishments; and before long he was daring Josh to tie him up with a piece of rope which he produced.

"Fix it just like you want, and give me five minutes to get loose, and see if I can't do it," he went on to boast.

Josh was generally willing to accommodate whenever the amateur magician seemed desirous of showing them a new trick. So he proceeded to wind the rope around the other, knotting it in numerous places, until it looked as though Hanky Panky must lie there until some one took pity on him, and undid the bonds.

"Now all I ask is that you turn your backs just five minutes," declared the one who was tied up so neatly; "and remember on your honor, Josh, not to peek even a little bit. Here you go, now; Rod, you count the time, and when the limit's up, why you c'n whirl around on me if you want."

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So they left him there to himself, bound, and apparently as helpless as a babe a week old. Josh was chuckling to himself the while.

"Guess Hanky he's run up against a snag when he 'lowed me to tie him any— which—way I wanted," he went on to say. "I certain sure did twist them ropes, and put in the knots. And it's goin' to take a long time to undo the same again, when he knuckles down, and says as how he gives the job up, because the combination didn't work. Oh! when it comes to tying knots, I don't take lessons from nobody, even if he does make out to be a great magician. You wait and see, that's all."

"Time's up, Hanky Panky!" announced Rod, just then.

Josh whirled around, expecting to see the other squirming helplessly there on the ground. Imagine his utter astonishment upon discovering the wonderful Hanky Panky coolly looping up the rope, knots and all, and quite free from any impediment.

"However did you do it, Hanky?" he gasped, darting forward to examine the rope, as though suspecting that a knife had been used to cut it in many pieces; but failing to find the slightest trace of such a thing.

"That's for me to know, and you to find out, Josh," remarked the other, coolly, handing over the rope for examination.

Josh was utterly bewildered, and even Rod and Elmer expressed their surprise.

"Of course there's some trick about it, which we can't get on to," remarked the former; "but I've heard of men who allowed themselves to be bound with chains that had locks on them, and shortly afterward walked out in front of the audience with their arms and legs free. It's always been a mystery to me, and I guess to a lot of other people. But I say, Hanky Panky, that ought to be a mighty useful trick of yours in case you ever fall into the hands of enemies, who would want to keep you a prisoner, and tie up your hands and ankles with ropes."

"Yes, that's so," agreed Rooster; "and we're mighty glad you know how to slip out of your bonds that slick way, old fellow. If you keep on learnin' things, p'raps now some time or other you'll be able to just take off your head, and pass it around for examination, then clap it back again where it belongs."

"Oh! I don't know about that," said Hanky Panky, with a dry chuckle; "because you see, *my* head's got something in it. Now, if it was you

"Don't you dare insinuate that mine's empty," ejaculated Rooster, pretending to be ready to throw a monkey wrench at the offender.

"Well, I've accomplished my object, anyway," declared the other.

"What was that?" asked Elmer.

"To prove to you all that while I might not be a first-class scout or woodsman, there is one thing in which I excel, and that's in the realm of mystery. None of you can hold a candle to me there."

"Yes, you sure hold the palm there, Hanky Panky," admitted Josh; "but I'd give a heap to know just however you got loose from them ropes and knots the way you did. It was like a miracle to me, that's what."

"Oh! that's only one little thing I've got up my sleeve to show you fellers now and then," observed the other proudly swelling his breast as a victor should, according to his notion. "You see, I've just about made up my mind

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to take up the study of the Black Art as a regular business. I just *love* to delve in everything that hinges on mystery and magic. While I'm down here in Dixie I hope to be able to get the foot of a rabbit that's been caught in a graveyard by the full of the moon. They say that brings good luck to the owner. And if I can only run across one of them old voodoo men I've heard so much about, among the negroes of the South, I'm going to do all I can to learn how he bewitches people so."

"If I was you, suh," remarked Elmer just then, "I think I'd cut out some of that same talk about witches and the like. I'm telling you this because I happen to know there have been stories told about this very region through which we're passing right now. Some folks say it's haunted ground. All sorts of terrible things are told by the darkies about the ghosts of Walnut Ridge. So, take my advice, suh, and whisper it, when you say anything about the supernatural, down in this heah section. Believe me, I mean it."

Rooster listened to all this with paling face, for he confessed he had always been a little inclined to believe in things that were connected with the return of spirits to this world. Perhaps more boys do than would like to confess to the fact; at any rate it is often impossible to coax one to walk into a country graveyard of a dark night, when the hour is close to twelve.

He was looking in absolute horror at Elmer while the Southern lad went on to remark as he did.

"Yes," he burst out with, "and I just guess the reckless fellow's gone and done it a'ready, because right now there's a mysterious light comin' bobbin' along the road up yonder; and it's like as not one of them ghosts alookin' for Hanky Panky!"

And as the others turned quickly to see what Rooster meant, they discovered that, sure enough, there was a queer light advancing toward them, now stopping, anon moving at right angles, then back again with a swift motion, only to be lowered close to the ground in the most mysterious fashion.

They all stared hard at the strange light.

"Whatever in the wide world can it be?" muttered Josh, usually as brave as a lion when it came to meeting any trouble that he could understand, but just now betraying positive signs of uneasiness.

"Anyhow, we're agoin' to know pretty soon," continued Rooster, grimly; "'cause she's making a pace thisaways right smart now. Rod, tell me, can ghosts climb trees, do you think? And hadn't we better be apickin' out the ones we want to use while we've got the chance?"

Somehow nobody laughed at Rooster's remark, silly though it must have sounded to some of the rest; in fact, every fellow was staring at the queer bobbing light, and trying the best he knew how to figure out just what it might mean.

CHAPTER IV. TREED.

"MEBBE it's only a star!" suggested Josh. The idea was so ridiculous, that even Rooster laughed scornfully.

"Yes, I guess if it is, that star's been on a grand old time, that's what!" Hanky Panky exclaimed; "because, just look how she jumps all over, now to the right, and then to the left; up and down. Star nothing! That there's a light somebody's aholdin' in their hand, a torch or else a lantern."

"Elmer, you've been raised down in this country, tell us what you think it can be?" asked Rod, as all of them remained there, watching the queer antics of the dancing star.

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"Well, now, suh, believe me, I hardly know what to say," remarked the Southern lad. "I've gone out with others to hunt raccoons and 'possums in the night time, and we always carried lights with us on such occasions."

"That's it, sure as you're born!" cried Josh, with new enthusiasm; "because I just heard a little bark, like it might come from a dog."

"Listen to that, would you?" cried Hanky Panky, as a loud, distinct baying began to come down to their ears. "Josh guessed it first pop. Of course they're a lot of 'coon hunters. Who's afraid?"

"But hold on a little, suh," urged Elmer. "I surely ought to know the tone of a coon dog's yelp; and I give you my word that doesn't sound even a little bit like it."

"Where's the difference, Elmer?" inquired Rod, as though he might be on the track of an explanation and needed some more light.

"Why, suh, it's thisaway, you see," the other continued, always willing to oblige when it lay in his power. "Most coon dogs are small active beasts, and they have a sharp yelp that tells the hunter when they've treed the game. You noticed, I reckon now, that when this dog gave tongue, it was a heavy deep sound, more like a hound, I should say."

"A rabbit hound, do you mean, Elmer?" asked Josh.

"I think I can give a pretty good guess," observed Rod, quietly, and at that they all turned toward him. "A little while ago I heard you tell how, when any of these black convicts escape from the gangs working on the roads they are hunted down, and brought back again. And am I right in thinking that this chase is carried on with bloodhounds, Elmer?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Rooster.

"Well, suh, I do believe that you've hit the right nail on the head, just as you nearly always do," remarked the Southern boy, enthusiastically; "we know there are a pair of convicts running at large around this region; and what more likely than that these hyah are the men hunting for the same? You see, they are following the road now, suh, and chances are we'll meet up with the same in a right smart short time."

"How about them hounds, Elmer; do they keep the same in leash, or let 'em swing around loose? I'm only askin', not that I care much, because trees are handy 'round us here; but I've always read that they're such savage beasts, you know?" Hanky Panky was saying; and even Rooster looked less alarmed, now that it seemed likely they were about to meet with a visible danger, rather than one that had a ghostly aspect.

"I wouldn't like to say, suh, because, to tell you the honest truth, I never yet had the pleasure of seeing an escaped convict chased; but it seems to me it would be policy for them to let the hounds run free, because then they could chase the fugitives so hard they'd just have to take to the trees, where the dogs would hold them safe till the guards came along."

"That settles it, for me anyway," remarked Josh; "I never did take much stock in getting bit by a dog. Me to a tree, and I ain't ashamed to tell it neither."

"Everybody get up among the branches as quick as you can," cried Rod; "because I think I can hear the rush of the hounds right now."

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"Whoop! where's my tree?" exclaimed Hanky Panky. "'Tain't fair the way you hooked it away from me, Josh Whitcomb. I saw it first, and you know it."

"Oh! quit your fussing and climb, Hanky; or else they'll get you. Here, gimme a hand, and I'll help you up. Hurry! hurry! I c'n see them aboundin' right this way like hot cakes, and oh! my stars! but they are big ones, I tell you!"

Of course, after that Hanky Panky lost no time in scrambling up among the lower branches of the tree in which his more agile comrade had already sought refuge; nor did he disdain in the least to accept of such aid as Josh was willing to bestow.

Hardly had the last of the five motorcycle boys settled himself some six feet or more from the ground, when there was a swift patter of coming feet, and then two large tawny dogs began to leap upward at them, giving vent to the most terrible growls, and yelps, that struck terror to the heart of poor Rooster.

He chanced to be somewhat lower down than any of the others, and when one of the leaping animals actually touched the sole of his shoe it sent a thrill through the boy's whole body.

"Climb higher, Rooster!" called Josh; "you want to pick a better perch than the one you got; or mebbe that dog'll get a grip on you next time. Look out! there he tries it again! Get a move an, quick, can't you? Think I want to sit here, and watch him chaw you all up into little ribbons? Give him a yank, Rod, can't you? There never was such an old slowpoke as you, Rooster."

Thus urged on by the cries of Josh, Rooster managed to draw himself up still higher in the tree, so that there was no longer any apparent danger of the hound fastening his teeth in his leggins, and dragging him down.

One of the pair of dogs was more agile than his mate and actually succeeded in managing to get some sort of hold with his forepaws in the crotch of the tree that was serving Josh and Hanky Panky as a harbor of refuge.

At that Josh uttered a whoop, and boldly attacking the beast, caused him to relax his hold, so that struggling desperately, and uttering short, savage snarls, he fell back to the ground again.

"There come the men!" called out Elmer, from his place of refuge.

"And I'm glad of it," declared Hanky Panky; "because, when they found they couldn't grab us, I really believe these hungry dogs'd pretty soon start to chawing up our motorcycles. Hey! this way, and hurry up, 'less you want your hounds shot all to pieces!"

"Listen to our Hanky Panky, would you?" burst out Josh; "and us with never a gun to our name. But then, perhaps he expects to just point his finger at 'em and say 'hocus pocus' or such thing, when bang! goes a shower of bullets. A fellow who can get loose after I tied him up could do most anything."

Three men were now seen hurrying along, one of whom swung a lighted lantern, the same whose glimmer had in the first place aroused the alarm of Rooster, and attracted the attention of the entire five motorcycle boys.

It could be seen that the men carried guns, and they also seemed to be attired in some sort of uniform; from which it was easy to guess that, just as Elmer and Rod had surmised, they must be guards hunting for the two escaped convicts.

When they came closer, and discovered the numerous motorcycles parked near the still burning camp-fire, they gave evidences of more or less surprise, not to mention bitter disappointment. Evidently they had heard the loud baying and yelping of the hounds, and expected to find one or both of the black fugitives perched aloft, trying to

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keep out of reach of those cruel exposed fangs of the dogs.

But the presence of the machines told them that such was not to be their good fortune; and that once more had the dogs treed the wrong persons.

"Welcome, strangers!" called out the unabashed Josh. "We're right glad to see you, believe me; and would you be so kind now, as to whistle off the dogs, so that we might come down from our perch, and occupy our camp?"

The three men looked up among the branches of the several trees, and seeing the faces of the five boys at first frowned, then burst into a roar of laughter, as the humor of the thing struck them.

CHAPTER V. THE CONVICT GUARDS.

"HEY, mister, it may look funny from your side, but we don't hanker about staying up here in these trees any longer'n we c'n help!" called out Josh, always impetuous, and a bit thoughtless.

"You don't say so, sonny?" jeered one of the men, a heavy-set fellow, with a face that was so ugly and sneering that it gave poor Rooster the cold creeps just to look at the same; "s'pose yuh come down, then."

"But them dogs'd jump on us, and take a bite before we could say Jack Robinson. Just fasten 'em up, if you please, so we c'n drop down, and be sociable like," Hanky Panky remarked.

"Well, we ain't alookin' foh any o' you jest yet," the short man went on to say in his snarling way; "but we kinder gut an ijee yuh might tell us more er less 'bout a pair o' coons as kim past thisaways a short time back. How 'bout it, younkers?"

"We saw the two you mention, that's true," observed Rod, thinking it time that he took matters in his hands; "and we'll be only too glad to tell you all about our experience with them."

"Reckons yuh better, son, if yuh knows what's good foh yuh," the man went on to say; "and so git a move on, an' spin her out."

"Don't you think it would be nicer for us to be down there on level ground with you, while we talk? It's anything but comfortable up here, I give you my word for it, sir," Rod continued.

The man who had been doing the speaking up to now growled savagely. Apparently he had a violent temper, and Rod pitied the unfortunate convict whom such a brute had to guard, or recapture.

"Beggars ortent tuh be choosers; an' sence our dawgs trailed hyah tuh this camp I reckons them as are in it hadn't orter tuh be so particular 'bout whah they be, if only the houn's teeth kin be kept away. Better speak up right whar yuh be, an' thank yuh stars we don't make yuh drap down right now."

"Tie up your dogs and we'll come down and tell you all we know," said Rod, with a flash of spirit. "We are travelers down here, and you have no right to threaten us as if we were escaped convicts. Not a word shall we speak until you do the right thing by us; just as you would want to be treated if the tables were turned, and the dogs were threatening you."

It was probably an unwise statement to make, and might have brought about trouble for the motorcycle boys, had that ugly-tempered guard been in supreme command of the detachment. Fortunately this did not happen to be the case.

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"Just hold on thar, Harper, the kid's right," said another man just then, and from the vein of authority in his voice it could readily be seen that he was in a position to enforce his opinions if need be; "these boys ain't done nawthin' tuh be threatened with the dawgs, an' 'tain't fair foh you tuh do the same. Git the leash on the hounds, Rider, an' be sure yuh hole 'em tight, er yuh'll hev tuh answer tuh me foh the consequences."

The third man immediately snapped a catch upon the collar of first one dog, and then the other. He was evidently the master of the hounds. The animals seemed to understand that they were not expected to do anything further, and proceeded to lie down, panting from their recent exertions.

"Now, kim down, boys," said the tall guard, not unkindly.

Rod accepted the invitation, and quickly dropped alongside the speaker. His companions made haste to follow his example; though Rooster looked dubiously toward the pair of ferocious hounds, and made sure to keep very close to his tree, as if desirous of again placing himself safely among the lower limbs, should one of the beasts slip its collar.

"Now I'm willing to tell you all we know about the two escaped convicts," Rod immediately remarked, as he turned to the friendly guard.

Accordingly he started in, and narrated how the black men had made out to be stealing one of their motorcycles, as if hoping that they would all rush after him, when the other might make a clean sweep of the food lying around. Probably it was this they wanted rather than the cumbersome machine, which would be of no value to them whatever.

The three men listened to all that was said. Once or twice the tall man interrupted Rod in order to ask a question, as some point may not have seemed as clear as he would have liked.

The short man, with the ugly face, and a temper to match, kept growling from time to time. Rod was not sure whether he was doing the right thing in telling such a brute as this about the runaways or not; he pitied any person or thing that would come under the dominion of a man who possessed such a hateful disposition as this one seemed to have.

But the taller guard had done the right thing by them, and seemed to be only following out his line of duty by the State in thus trying to retake the convicts who had broken away.

"What kind of men are they, suh?" asked Elmer, and possibly there was that in his tone that told the guard he was Southern born, for he shot a quick glance that way.

"The shorter man is a desperate case, one o' the toughest we ever had tuh deal with," he went on to say; "he's known as Yellow Yamma, and chances are we'll never fotch him back alive. The other is a coal-black coon known only as Ajax. But we ought tuh be movin' along right smart now, if so be we wants tuh run them two down this same night. They're some tired as it is, an' cain't keep it up much longer, we reckons. Which way did the critter run as tried tuh snatch yuh grub, was yuh sayin', son?"

Of course it was now up to Elmer to tell, because he and Rooster were the only ones who had seen the second black convict.

"Fetch the dogs over here, suh, and I'll show you where he was when we sighted him last," he said, waving his hand at the same time, with the manner of one who was accustomed to telling others what to do; and somehow Elmer's demeanor impressed even the rough-voiced guard who had been so ugly toward Josh possibly because he guessed the other was a "Yankee."

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"Reckons as how they'll kim together again some ways off," remarked the leader of the pursuers, as he followed Elmer; "if we could only git that yellow un agin we wouldn't keer so much 'bout t'other, who's on'y a common idle coon, an' fotched up agin the law by gettin' in bad company. Is this the place, younker?"

"Yes, we saw him running about here," replied Elmer. "You see, he thought to snatch up some of our food, and get off befo' we could prevent it; but it happened that we were too quick for him; and seeing the clubs we swung I reckon suh the yellow fellow didn't have spirit enough to stand out, but turned and fled. If you take the trouble to look heah, suh, you will see his tracks."

"It's all right, son, an' we sure is much 'bliged tuh yuh for showin' us. The dawg'll soon git on the track agin; an' this time we'll try an' end the run, one way er 'nother."

The cruel grin that flashed across the ugly face of the short man, when his leader said this, together with the way he took a fresh grip on the repeating rifle he carried, told plainer than words which way he preferred, when it came to bringing the long chase to an end. Rooster shivered as he kept his eyes fastened on that merciless face; and doubtless thanked his stars that it was not a fellow answering *his* description whom the two guards from the convict camp were hunting with their "dawgs."

The third man, who had been called Rider by the chief, brought the dogs close to the spot where the prints of bare feet showed in the soil. He had little difficulties in getting the animals to recognize the scent that they had been following, for quickly each dog in turn raised his head and gave a long-drawn bay that rang out through the surrounding forest in a way that caused some of the boys to shudder.

Then they started to tug furiously at the leash, evidently eager to be free to dash away on the trail of the hunted fugitives.

"Hold 'em till I give yuh the word, Rider," said the tall man, possibly afraid lest the hounds might turn on some of the boys, should they be set free while in the immediate neighborhood of the camp-fire.

He was the last of the three guards to hurry away, and reaching the fringe of bushes he had the decency to turn, and wave his hand, as he called out:

"So-long, younkers!"

Presently there came back to the ears of the boys a series of quick, snappy yelps, that sounded through the woods with startling distinctness. They knew from this that Rider had let the hounds loose again; and the joyful cries signified their savage desire to come up with the objects of the pursuit.

Again and again did the yelps come floating back to the ears of the listening boys, gradually growing fainter as the dogs rushed along the road, and doubtless entered among the thick growth of trees beyond.

And when they could no longer catch the thrilling sounds the boys turned and looked seriously at each other. No one spoke immediately. There was not even a single laugh over the comical aspect of the case when the coming of the hounds had caused them to seek safety among the branches of the trees.

They really felt sorry for the wretched fugitives who were being chased by such a savage combination as those two tawny dogs and that brutal, short-set guard.

The tragedy of it acted as a weight upon the spirits of the boys; and finally in silence they sauntered back to their cheery fire; but it was quite some time before they felt like themselves again.

CHAPTER VI. ELMER EXPLAINS.

"ROD, the time has come when I feel that I ought to take you into my confidence more than I have up to now."

Elmer said this as he dropped down alongside his chum, who had been writing on one side of the camp-fire, while Rooster, Hanky Panky and Josh were engaged in a discussion on the other side, sometimes introducing considerable fun into their remarks, and again being serious enough.

Rod looked up and smiled.

"That is just as you think best, Elmer," he said, softly. "I've been satisfied with the way things have been going on; and I knew that when the right time came along you'd tell me more about your mission down here in old Tennessee. If you feel that time has arrived, all right, go ahead and spin the yarn. I'm sure I'll be deeply interested, and you know without my saying it that you can count on me to stand by you, through thick and thin. Yes, and the other fellows will say just the same, when you choose to tell them the story."

The warm-hearted Southern boy thrust out his hand toward his chum as Rod said this.

"I've known all along I could count on the lot of you to help me out, if it came to it; and it's been a blessing to feel that I had such good chums with me," he went on to say. "I meant to come down here alone, and see if there was anything in that fancy of mine; but when you heard me say as much, you insisted on keeping me company, and said the other boys would be hurt if I left them out. And indeed, Rod, it's the finest thing I know to have you—all along."

"Please cut that out, Elmer, and get right down to hard pan," said the other, who disliked to be praised for anything he had ever done.

"Then listen," Elmer observed, growing serious again, as he contemplated the matter that had been the cause of his making this long pilgrimage. "You know, Rod, that all of my earlier years were spent down here, not a great many miles away from the city of Chattanooga. My folks were in the army that fought your general Grant when he came down heah, and started Sherman on his famous march through Georgia to the sea.

"We owned a fine place, let me tell you, suh, and in the old days kept fifty slaves on our plantation. Even after the war our family prospered, and my grandfather was considered a wealthy gentleman. You have met him many times, Rod; and know that since our coming No'th he's never been in his right mind.

"We were forced to leave our old home down heah by a series of unfortunate circumstances. The old gentleman had invested most of his money in certain securities, and hid the same away. Then he had a fall from his hoss, and was brought home fo' dead, but we managed to save his life, though from that day he was never the same; and try as we could it was utterly impossible, suh, for any of us to get him to tell where he had put away the valuable securities.

"In the end we had to let our home go to strangers, and proceed to emigrate to the No'th. How we came to Garland you already know, because your folks had something to do with it; but that is a matter apart from the subject we are talking about now, which concerns my reasons for wanting to return to my former home here, *without any one knowing about it.*

"Now listen closely, Rod, fo' here lies the meat in the cocoanut. About three weeks ago I happened to heah my grandfather talking in his sleep, and listening, at first out of mere curiosity, I soon felt myself thrilled by words he kept repeating over and over again. This was what he was saying to himself, Rod:

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"The stone is very heavy. It makes me strain every muscle to lift it. But under there they will surely be safe! But I must always be sure to remove every trace of its having been moved. There, no one would ever suspect they were so near. It is as secure as a locker in a safe deposit company's vault, and ever so much cheaper.'

"Each time he would laugh softly to himself, as if he thought it quite a joke. And you can imagine how it made me shake all over as I remembered about those long missing securities, which he had hidden away just befo' he was stricken."

Elmer seemed shaken by the memory of it all, for when Rod put his hand on that of his best chum he felt the other quivering like a leaf.

"I can understand it, Elmer," he said, with an encouraging nod. "You believed, and rightly too, I think, that in his sleep memory was taking your grandfather back once more to where he hid those papers. It was under a large stone, judging from what he said; and I take it you've got a pretty good idea you know where that same stone may be right now."

Rod himself showed signs of excitement by this time. There is always something very exhilarating about a search for treasure, no matter where located; and boy though Rod might be, he could feel the deepest interest in this mission of his chum.

"I am positive I do," the other went on to say. "For days and days I've been almost unable to think of anything else, and I believe I'd go crazy if the chance hadn't come fo' me to run down here, and put it all to the test."

"Tell me more about it, Elmer, now that you've gone so far," urged Rod.

"I remembered that in our former home there was just such a big stone forming the hearth in the great living-room, where I spent so many happy days years ago. And the more I got to thinking about it, the stronger became my conviction that he *must* have hidden the papers under that, believing them perfectly safe there. I know it is an old story, and that others have done the same thing; but then that wouldn't have kept my grandfather from trying it. He was old-fashioned anyhow. Now, what do you think about it, Chum Rod?"

"Just as you do," replied the other, hastily and eagerly; "that the chances are three to one it's going to turn out as you say. But perhaps you'd better go slow, and not feel too sure, because the disappointment would be bitter if they didn't happen to be there when you came to look."

"Do you mean that he may not have put them there at all?" asked Elmer, weakly.

"Well, even if he did, some one may have been ahead of you," urged Rod. "It's been a number of years since you lived down here, and there was always a chance that the hearth-stone may have been raised for some reason or other. I'm only saying this, not to discourage you, because we must make the search, now that we've come this far, but to keep you from having too great a disappointment. You understand, Elmer?"

"Yes, I understand, Rod, and believe me, I couldn't want a better or truer chum than you've always been to me. Sometimes I try to tell myself that it's only a wild dream on my part; and then I seem to hear him saying those words over and over again; and it sends the hot blood bounding through every vein with *hope*."

"Well, it won't be long now, before you can know," Rod went on to say; "but do you suppose the people who are living there at present will allow you to make the search, and take away anything you find?"

Elmer's face clouded at that.

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"I really don't know, Rod," he said, slowly; "in the first place, suh, I'm more or less in the dark as to what sort of a gentleman this Colonel Pepper may be. My recollection of him isn't very clear. I only seem to remember that he had a bullying way about him, and that my mother resented it, because well, to tell the truth, he was a Northern man, and didn't seem to be a real gentleman. But then that was years ago. I do not know what sort of family Colonel Pepper has, or what kind of a man he is now."

Rod seemed to consider the matter, and Elmer waited to hear what next he would say, for like all the others of the chums he valued Rod's advice greatly.

"I'll tell you what I think," finally remarked Rod; "we'd better keep it quiet that you're Elmer Overton until we know our ground better. Then we can prowl around some, and feel our way. Perhaps we might even manage to get an invitation from this colonel to visit him at his home, when you would have a fine chance to look under that hearth-stone then, and see if the papers are there."

"You seem to hit the nail right on the head, believe me, Rod!" said the other, enthusiastically. "And that is the very thing we can do. When once you get planning there's little beyond you; and I wouldn't be surprised one little bit if you did manage to do Colonel Pepper a great favor, on account of which he invited the lot of us to visit him."

Elmer seemed to be considerably excited over the idea he had advanced. Sanguine by nature, and feeling the utmost confidence in the ability of his closest chum to accomplish the seemingly impossible, he already considered that his cause was in a fair way of being carried.

"You expect to tell the rest soon, I hope?" questioned Rod, a minute later, as he cast a fond glance toward the other side of the fire.

Josh and Rooster were still lying there, Hanky Panky having gone over to the little gurgling creek to get a drink; a very common occurrence with him, as he seemed to be constantly dry, and wanting to "wet his throat," as he called it.

"Surely," quickly replied Elmer; "I wanted to tell you first, because you already knew a part of the story. And perhaps, before we go to sleep to-night, I'll get them together, and repeat what I've said to you. They've stuck by me like brothers, and I'm just as certain of their backing me up, as I was that you'd say all you did."

"Well, by another night, then, we ought to be close by where you used to live; for Chattanooga can't be a great ways off now?" Rod ventured to remark.

"Just as you say, Rod, we'll soon strike Walnut Ridge, and it is on that elevation, with the most beautiful view you ever saw, that my old home lies that is, if it hasn't been burned down since we left it years ago; for none of us have ever been back here, and I don't think letters have followed us either."

"Well, even if that had happened it might not have made any difference with the papers lying snug under that big hearth-stone," Rod hastened to say, seeing that the other had begun to show signs of a new anxiety.

"Thank you, Rod; and it is really as you say, the stone would have protected anything lying underneath from the fire. I'm going to quit borrowing trouble, and just try and believe it's all bound to come out well."

"And if you're feeling in the humor for it, Elmer, why not ask the others to join us here right now? I'll tell the story, if you want me to, and who knows but what one of our chums may have some bright idea to suggest. You never can tell; and five heads are better than two, any day in the week."

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"Just as you please about it, Rod," replied the other; "wait until Hanky Panky comes back from the spring. He's making a regular path there with his wanting to get a drink so often. Did you ever know a fellow with so dry a throat? I'd pity Hanky if ever he started across the California Desert; chances are he'd have to carry a barrel of water to keep his tongue from getting parched. But look at him coming along now, and on the 'ump too! Why, he's as white as a sheet! Whatever do you reckon he's been and run up against. Can it be he's stepped on a rattler; for you know, he hates snakes like poison?"

"We'll soon know," said Rod, as he hastened to scramble to his feet; "because he seems to be heading right for us, and if he don't lose his voice, he means to tell us just what's happened!"

CHAPTER VII. A CALL FOR HELP.

"WHAT ails you, Hanky?" demanded Rod, as the other came panting up to them, his face ghastly in color.

"Whee! I'm cold as ice! To think of me running smack on a dead man!" gasped the boy, in a quavering tone.

"Hey! what's that he says?" exclaimed Josh, starting to join them, with Rooster tagging at his heels like a little "me too."

Rod caught hold of the one who had given utterance to such an astounding thing.

"See here, collect yourself, and tell us what it means!" he remarked, sternly.

Hanky Panky seemed to get a new grip on himself. He always did when Rod took hold of the case, and started to engineer things after his customary positive fashion.

"Cross my heart it's true, Rod; indeed, I'm not fooling this time, or tryin' to play a trick on you. I was just steppin' over the log when I looked down, and oh! my stars, there was a man alyin' there, as stiff as anything. I just came along as if I hadn't seen a thing; but my knees felt like they was knockin' together."

"Where was this?" asked Rod.

"Right between the fire and the place where I get my drinks at the spring," came the prompt answer, as Hanky Panky nodded his head in the quarter he indicated.

"But haven't you gone that same way several times before, since we settled down here for the night?" asked Rod.

"Sure I have," the other replied.

"Stepped over that same log, perhaps, too?" continued the leader.

"Yep, that's so, Rod."

"In exactly the same place?"

"Guess you're right about that; there's a sort of a trail I got in the habit of follerin', you see," Hanky went on to admit.

"Well, stop and think, if that thing was there before, when you went to the water to get a drink, wouldn't you have seen it? You had the same eyes, and the fire must have been just as bright then as now."

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Hanky Panky scratched his head; and then looked up quickly.

"Sure I don't see how I could a missed it," he replied.

"Then what makes you think it was a dead man?" asked Rod.

"Mostly because he didn't move a bit when I stepped over the log. But I c'n see what you mean, Rod. He must a come there since I got my last drink, ain't that it?"

And Rod nodded his head, as he turned to Elmer, saying:

"We must look into this thing, boys. Get lights and clubs as quick as you can, every fellow!"

"And I'll watch, to make sure he don't skip out!" observed Rooster, who was none too anxious to be in the van when they advanced toward that fallen tree, behind the trunk of which the other had declared some one was lying hidden.

Josh was the first to announce himself as ready. He had picked out a fine torch from the fire, and in his other hand clutched the cudgel that he had kept by him at the time the two hounds were so close, under the impression that possibly it would come in handy. And Josh was glad now that he had so good a weapon.

Hanky Panky had followed suit in so far as securing a heavy stick went, though he did not try to find a light. As for Rod and Elmer, they were ready shortly after the speedy Josh announced himself as prepared to advance.

Indeed, he had to be recalled by Rod; for, with his usual impetuosity Josh had taken half a dozen steps toward the fallen tree before the others were moving.

"Wait for us, Josh," said Rod; "better keep together, as we don't know what we may be up against."

"That's so," echoed Hanky Panky; "and if you'd had the scare I did, I tell you right now, you'd be careful how you rushed things. I thought my heart would jump right out of my throat when I made it out to be somebody alyin' there!"

The five of them advanced slowly toward the spot. Hanky Panky was the guide, and from time to time he directed them to turn this way or that. It was a weird spectacle, those flaming lights advancing toward a certain spot, with the boys waving their cudgels as they walked, and exchanging low comments.

"Look out now, you're mighty near to him," cautioned Hanky Panky, in a thrilling whisper, that naturally added to the nervousness of the others.

Now they had reached the fallen tree. Rod, holding his burning torch low, could see where the thirsty one had made a regular trail going to, and coming from the water. And right there he had been compelled on each occasion to step over the log.

Perhaps, in going to the creek he had failed to look down, and thus did not notice the figure stretched alongside the tree trunk; but on his return it caught his attention, just as he had declared.

Rod motioned to Elmer and Josh to spread out a little, while he himself stayed on the trail in the center.

Then he took a couple of steps forward, leaned over, and held his torch in such a manner that its light fell across the log.

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Rooster held his breath with a great fear of what might follow.

He saw Rod bend down even further, as though examining something. Then he spoke in a low but commanding tone.

"Come up out of that!"

Immediately something began to stir behind the log. Then a figure came into view.

"Oh!" gasped Rooster, as he stared with all his might; "it's one of them escaped convicts, sure it is, 'cause I c'n see the striped clothes!"

That was just what it was, a fellow as black as the ace of spades, and just shaking like a leaf in the breeze, with dread lest the boys would deliver him over to the men and the dogs.

"Close up around him, fellows," Rod next ordered; and this the others immediately did. But the prisoner gave no evidence of wanting to run away.

"'Deed, I'se ain't meanin' tuh run, no, sah. I kim back hyah jest apurpose tuh ask yuh tuh gib me a bite, foh de lub o' misery. Ain't had nebber a single mouthful ob anyt'ing dis tree days back. I'se tellin' youse de truf, 'clar tuh goodness I is, boss."

He said this in a trembling voice, that immediately caused the boys to feel something like sympathy for the poor wretch.

Rod looked at him keenly. He saw the black man had a face that was simple, rather than coarse or repulsive. Just now it seemed to be pathetic in its appeal.

It was a time for quick thinking. What should they do about it? True, this man wore the degrading garments that stamped him a convicted criminal; but then Rod, young as he was, knew that often innocent men manage to get in prison. And then again, many colored convicts in the South are such simply because they had been unwise enough to allow their temper to force them into a fight Elmer had told him so.

No matter who or what this fellow might be, he was a human being, and hungry at that, nearly starved in fact. He had tried to get possession of their food by trying to coax them away from their camp while his mate ran away with what supplies they possessed; but lots of men who claimed to be honest would have done the same thing, under similar conditions. Rod was one of those who believed that a great many persons in this world are honest because they have never known what it was to be hungry.

"I guess we'll go you, Ajax," he said, presently, remembering that the guard had told them that this was the name of the black fugitive; and also that there was not so very much against him, for it was the desperate mulatto whom they were most desirous of overtaking.

The black face lost some of its anxious look; even the ghost of a grin crept over it, as the man heard what Rod said.

"That's right, Rod, "declared warm-hearted Josh; "we've got plenty to eat along; and the poor chap looks like he could tackle about the toughest article going; so let's give him a decent meal for once, and then wash our hands of him."

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"Elmer, are you of that mind too?" asked Rod, who knew that the Tennessee boy was better acquainted with the peculiarities of the negro race than any of the rest, and his opinion ought to be sought in a case of this kind.

"Certainly, suh; the poor boy needs it the worst kind. I'd do without breakfast myself rather than deny him," came the quick response.

And so they all moved over to the fire, where the man was told to sit down, and wait until another pot of coffee could be boiled, as well as some ham cooked. In the meanwhile, to take the savage edge off his ravenous appetite, Rod gave him part of a box of crackers, and a hunk of cheese, to gnaw on; which Ajax proceeded to demolish without ceremony, much as a hungry dog would bolt pieces of meat that were thrown to him.

Rod sat down near the convict. Somehow he did not seem to feel such a repugnance as would seem natural. Perhaps it was because the fellow's face, now that the hungry, anxious expression had vanished, was of a happy-go-lucky type, and reassured the boy. He felt certain that Ajax, just as the guard had said, was not a bad man by nature, but had come into his present difficulty through weakness.

"What made you come back here near us, Ajax?" Rod asked him, presently, when he saw that the other could talk without choking over the crackers.

"I done couldn't bear tuh tear myself away from de grub, sah, an' dat am de truth," came the grinning reply. "I was de man dat make out tuh steal de big heavy bicycle, so dat Yaller, he could grab up somethin' tuh eat, 'case as how we was done starvin'. When dat fell through I nebber meant tuh jine him ergin, 'case I skeered o' dat nigger; he say as how he mean tuh do fo' me de firstest time I try tuh cut loose frum him."

"And so you came back here, boy, to find out if we'd give you a meal, was that it?" asked Elmer.

"Yassir, dat am de way ob it," the other went on, eagerly. "I done git to de crick when I heah's de dawgs a yelpin'; an' den I walk in de water, so's tuh kill de scent. Den I heahd dem agoin' away on de track ob Yaller, an' I t'inks it time I creep up tuh ask yuh fo' de crumbs frum de table."

"Well, make your mind easy, Ajax," said Rod, as Josh came up with the fried ham, followed by Hanky Panky bearing the coffee; "we don't mean to hold you for the convict camp guards. When you're done eating you can go your way, understand?"

The wretched Ajax mumbled his thanks, for he was already deep into the appetizing slice of ham. And sitting there, the motorcycle boys watched him eat ravenously. It was certainly a sight none of them would ever forget. Josh and Hanky Panky may have believed they knew what hunger was; but as they saw the almost frantic actions of this man who had been three days without food, they admitted that they had never been in the same class.

CHAPTER VIII. LUCKY AJAX.

AFTER a while, when Ajax had consumed the meat, and fallen back again on to the crackers and cheese, with his fifth cup of coffee, Rod thought it worth while to ask more questions.

He found himself growing interested in the plight of the poor wretch, who had been made so supremely happy over a small thing like that meal.

"How did you and Yellow happen to escape?" he inquired.

"I done tell yuh how dat was, boss," Ajax responded, promptly, and with an air of confidence that impressed them

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very much, since it seemed to say that the fellow had come to look upon them as his friends; "dey done got me word in de camp de udder day dat my lil piccaninny, George, he was mighty sick. Dat boy am de apple ob my eye, an' I felt as how I'd jes' take any sorter chances tuh git tuh whar de ole woman an' de chillen was. An' like he knowed what was passing in my mind, dat Yaller, he tempt me tuh hit it up wid him. Since den he done inform me dat he on'y wanted me along 'case two might be harder tuh track dan one. An' I kinder specks he done meant tuh sacrifice me, if in dat way he could shunt off de dawgs."

"You ran for it then, did you, boy, when a chance came?" asked Elmer.

Rod noticed that his chum always spoke to the other, who was at least middle-aged as "boy;" and he concluded that it was a common practice in the South, even negroes with white hair being addressed in that way.

"Yassah, dat's what we did; an' Yaller, he fix it so well we gits a good start afore dey smells a rat. So fo' three days now, we's been ahidin' out, now in de dark ob de woods, an' agin in de swamp, which ain't like de canebrake ob ole Alabama State. But I ain't no nearer seein' my lil George than afore I skipped out. It makes me right sad tuh think ob it, sah."

Rod looked at the others. Apparently he had conceived some sort of idea. He beckoned to Elmer, and then in turn to Josh, Hanky Panky and Rooster, all of whom gradually withdrew from the vicinity of the black man, and joined Rod close by.

"I c'n give a guess what you're agoin' to spring on us, old fellow," said Josh, in his customary breezy way, quick as a flash to read any one's mind; "and before you say one single word I want you to know that I'm for it, hoofs, hide and horns."

"And you can count on me helping out, Rod," added Hanky Panky.

"Ditto here, suh," Elmer said, gravely, but with his usual sunny smile.

"I don't know what's in the wind," Rooster went on, piteously; "but whatever it may be, I'm for it with my whole heart; because I know that anything Rod originates is just bound to be all right."

All this made Rod very happy. He knew that those boys had hearts of gold; and no appeal for help, would find them shut.

"Thank you, fellows," he went on to say; "it's just this way, Rooster here we are, with everything we want in the wide world, and plenty to satisfy our appetites whenever we just feel like eating. And here's this black man, without one single friend in the wide world, seems like to him just now. He's learned that his little boy is sick, and he wants to get to see him the worst kind; but his time isn't up, and in his desperation he links his fortunes with those of a bad scoundrel who tempts him, and they take French leave of the convict camp. Now, we've fed and sheltered him, and perhaps by going back on his tracks he may escape those dogs and men. The question is, shall we go even further, and help him escape?"

The boys looked at each other. They wondered whether they would be doing a grave wrong in assisting a convict to get away. Under many circumstances it would certainly be a mistake; but somehow they felt that Ajax ought to be helped. If his story were true, it would never come back to them that they had done wrong in assisting the poor fellow to get to where his wife and family were.

"All of you who are ready to help, raise your hands," asked Rod.

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At once every one of the five quickly had a right hand elevated; it looked as though they could hardly get it in evidence fast enough.

"Well, that settles it for once and all," commented Rod; "whether it's right or wrong, we're going to help Ajax on his way, if he can show us any proof that the story he tells us is true. I've got an old sweater I'll let him have; Josh, you might contribute that pair of khaki trousers you fetched along, but have never had on; and Hanky Panky, how about those sneaker shoes you complained of being a mile too big for you; they would fit his bare feet, I take it?"

"Only too glad to help out, and get rid of the old things," observed Hanky.

"And if he should happen to be caught, we can fix it so that Ajax'll say he took the things out of our camp when we were looking the other way," announced Josh.

And so they came back to where the convict still sat, just finishing the last drop of coffee the pot contained, the like of which he had possibly never tasted before in all his life.

"See here, Ajax," said Rod, without any prelude, "we mean to help you still more, but think it only right that you should show us something to prove that your story is true. How did you hear about your little child being sick? Can you show us anything that would go to prove it?"

At that the other nodded his head eagerly, and grinned.

"'Deed, an' dat's jes' what I kin do, sah, sho's yuh bo'n," he said, as he started to thrust a hand into the ragged garments with which he was clad, and which, faded as they were, still bore the degrading stripes that stamped the bearer a convict.

"I heerd de sad news when Willie Sharps he done kim tuh de camp. My wife she tells him tuh find me, an' let me know dat she jest 'bout agwine back ober de state line tuh ole Alabama agin, whar we belongs, she done got enuff ob Tennessee, she say. An' he slips dis lil paper intuh mah hand. I ain't a drefle peart reader, sah, but I done able tuh make out what it say."

He handed Rod the soiled slip which had been carried for days, and doubtless read many times. Indeed, the boy was not sure but what some of the discolorations he noticed on the paper had been made by the scalding tears shed by the poor convict when he realized again and again that there was a mighty slim chance of his ever seeing his "lil George" alive again.

The writing, which was almost illegible by now, ran as follows:

"Lil George he done be rite sick. He keeps acallin fo yu so mutch. Ise ahopin yu gits out in tim to see him afore he go. Dats al I knoes. Liza."

Rod passed it around until every one of them had read those pitiful words.

"We believe you've been telling us the truth, Ajax," he went on to say, as he handed the slip of precious paper back, and watched the other fold it with trembling hands, and store it safely away again; "and now listen to what I want to say to you."

"Yassah! yuh done be mighty kind tuh de ole man, an' I ain't agwine tuh furgit it, neither. Ebery time I kneels down I mean tuh bress de good Lawd fo' sendin' me sich fine friends in my time ob need. If de shiny ang'ls done come down outen de hebens dey couldn't ahelped me any moah dan you has. 'Deed an' 'deed I'se suah grateful, fo' it, sah."

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"Now, we're going to place these things right here," continued Rod; "you'll find an old sweater, a pair of trousers, and some shoes that you can wear. When we look the other way you must grab them up, and then scoot. We'll pretend to chase after you, but don't be afraid, for we won't try to capture you. In the pockets of the trousers you might happen to find a little cash, too. Keep it, Ajax, as a present from us all, And we hope you'll be able to get across the state line, and find things all well. And when you look into the face of 'lil George' just remember that five boys from the North felt sorry for you. That's all, Ajax."

The man looked as though he could hardly believe his ears. He seized Rod's hand that happened to be closest, and kissed it passionately, until the embarrassed boy snatched it away.

"Here, none of that, Ajax!" he exclaimed, as though really offended. "But if you feel like it, perhaps you might shake hands all around. And while you're about it, give me an address where a letter would reach you later. Some time we would like to know whether you really did get safely through, and how you found 'lil George.'"

Ajax hastened to tell where a letter would find him, or his wife at least. Then he started to squeeze a hand of each of them. Meanwhile Rooster had been busily at work making up a small package of food, which he also thrust into a pocket of the khaki trousers that were to be donated to charity.

Somehow the boys felt a peculiar delight in thus helping a poor unfortunate who may have transgressed the law, yet was no ordinary offender; and who had doubtless learned a lesson he would never forget.

Perhaps, too, they could not get the ugly face of that cross-grained guard wholly out of mind; and there was something akin to satisfaction in thinking how, if their friendly plans turned out all right, he would never again have a chance to let *one* wretched prisoner feel the weight of his fist when angered.

"Now, we're going to be looking the other way, Ajax; and we'll count a hundred only, so be spry about it, you hear."

"Yassah, yassah, suah I does!" ejaculated the other, as he scrambled to his feet eagerly, rubbing his eyes as though trying to make sure that he was awake, and not lying under a rude shelter in the convict camp, dreaming.

So Rod began counting out loud, as he and his chums stood there with their backs turned. He knew that Rooster and Hanky Panky, perhaps Josh as well, insisted on peeping; but neither Rod nor Elmer would descend to this, and not until the whole hundred had been reeled off would either of them turn.

When they did, of course Ajax was gone, as was also the little heap of clothes.

"Hey! he's hooked a lot of our duds!" exclaimed Hanky Panky, doubtless thinking he ought to make out to be dreadfully surprised.

"After him, fellows!" called Josh.

They made a little bluff of trying to beat the bushes in search of the fugitive convict, but of course had to give it up, and return to the vicinity of the fire, chuckling among themselves.

"I only hope," said Rod, when they sat down again, and Elmer prepared to repeat his story to the other three chums who were gathering around him; "that the poor chap gets clear, and crosses over into Alabama again, that's all. He may have been deceiving us, but I don't think so, for he was a simple darcy; and I guess that letter was genuine. Anyhow, we did what we thought was right; but we want to keep mighty quiet about it, or we're apt to get in trouble."

CHAPTER IX. TALKING OF GHOSTS.

"WELL, I hope the trousers turn out to be a good fit for Ajax!" remarked Josh, after they had settled down once more to take things comfortably.

"And that he c'n get them sneaker canvas shoes, with the rubber soles, on his feet," Hanky Panky went on to say, reflectively. "I thought I'd enjoy 'em first-rate myself, but as they turned out so big, I kept sloshin' around all the time in 'em."

"And I'm dead sure the old sweater I turned over to the poor fellow will feel a whole lot better than the thin rags he had on," observed Rod, with a smile, and a satisfied shake of his head; "because, you see, he must just despise those zebra stripes that go to stamp him a convict in the eyes of every one."

"I feel a whole lot better, suh, from having helped the poor chap along," admitted Elmer.

"We all must," added Rooster, who had as tender a heart as the next one, even though unable to express his feelings as eloquently as Rod or Elmer. "But just at the time I ran across Ajax you were telling us something about the ghosts of Walnut Ridge, Elmer; suppose you go right along now, and finish. Of course, you mustn't think I believe in such silly things as ghosts; but ever since I c'n remember, I've always felt the greatest interest in hearing or reading about 'em."

The other boys smiled. They understood well enough. Rooster had always shown a weakness in the line of the supernatural, although secretly ashamed of the fact, and always ready to stoutly deny it.

"Oh!" remarked Elmer, with a wink in the direction of the others, "all I know is that there used to be a number of people who really believed ghosts haunted the region of Walnut Ridge. You see, suh, that name covers a wide section of country further to the south, and which we shall strike to-morrow on our way to Chattanooga. My old home, to tell you the truth, is located in the very heart of the same Ridge."

"You don't say, Elmer!" exclaimed Rooster, deeply interested. "And you lived there up to three years back, didn't you?"

"About that length of time," replied the other, who evidently knew what Rooster was leading up to in these questions.

"How about you ever running up against a ghost, Elmer?" finally asked the other.

"Well, what d'ye think of that now, for a stunner?" cried Josh. "However could he meet up with what you say you don't believe in, tell me that, Rooster?"

"But did you ever *think* you saw a real ghost?" persisted the other, as if bent on striking while the iron was hot, and learning all he could about a matter that, as he confessed, had a singularly strong fascination for him.

Elmer rubbed his chin, as though reflecting.

"There was one occasion, suh, that I remember quite well," he started to say, when Rooster, greatly excited, and with a perceptible tremor to his voice, interrupted him.

"Then you did meet up with *something* that you thought might be er a sorter ghost?" he demanded.

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"I'll tell you about it, if you wish," Elmer went on obligingly; and the others settled themselves to listen; Rooster in particular leaning forward, and with eyes that seemed round with eagerness, fastened on the young Southerner.

"Go ahead, Elmer," said Hanky Panky, somewhat uneasily; for while he might not feel just as Rooster did about such things, there was a certain "spookiness" in connection with the subject, especially when the night wind was sighing mournfully through the bare limbs of a dead tree close at hand; and an owl far away in the woods was giving vent to his feelings in long-drawn hoots, that somehow seemed to be associated with grave-yards, and such things.

"Well, it happened one black night when I was on the road," Elmer started to say, seriously, his manner impressing Rooster even more than his words. "I was not thinking of anything like ghosts, for I didn't believe in such things, though I knew lots of boys, black and white, who did. And then, all of a sudden, I saw something white moving ahead of me, though not a sound could I hear."

"Whee!"

Rooster whistled this word through his closely set teeth. Apparently in imagination he was putting himself in Elmer's place; and perhaps a cold shiver even ran through his body as he mentally saw that uncanny white object.

"What did you do?" asked practical Josh.

"I stood still, and looked," Elmer went on to say, in that odd, awed voice, which Rod fully believed was assumed just to add to the feelings of Rooster, "It kept moving, first this way, and then that. I even fancied I could see a white arm waving at me, just as if the thing meant for me to clear out."

"Yes," quavered Rooster, which was equivalent to saying: "hurry up, and tell us what else happened, Elmer."

"I wanted to run the worst kind," continued the other boy; "but something seemed to have gripped me; and honest, I just couldn't move a leg. You've all been that way, I reckon, when you had the night-mare?"

"Sure thing," allowed Josh.

"And it is a terrible sensation to feel, I tell you," Hanky Panky went on to say, but Rooster only breathed hard, and waited for the balance of the story.

"Well," Elmer continued, in an aggravatingly slow way, "there I stood, with my heart beating so fast I seemed to feel it crowding right up in my throat. And all the while that white object was coming straight at me! I reckon, suh, I must have lived a year in that little time. Then it made a whinnying sound, and I knew that it must be the old white hoss belongin' to Mr. Cragin, that he'd turned loose in pasture!"

"Sho! was that all it was?" gasped Rooster, in a vastly disappointed tone, as if he had anticipated something at least much more dreadful.

"Yes, suh, that was all," Elmer went on. "You see the animal had jumped the fence, and was feeding alongside the road, where the ground was soft; and that was why I didn't hear his hoofs strike. He could see me, though, and was expectin' to be spoken to, because everybody knew Old Moses. And between us all, I reckon now, that most ghosts are apt to turn out just as silly as mine did, if they're examined into."

"Of course they are," Rooster said, stoutly; but nevertheless Rod was of the opinion that a whole lot of his assurance was assumed.

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"Forget all about that thing, and tell us about the moonshiners down here in Tennessee; ain't we likely to run across a whole bunch of the gents while we're nosin' about among the lonely roads of the mountains?" Josh wanted to know; for being of a practical turn of mind, his dangers were usually a concrete species, something you could see and feel, and run away from, if necessary.

"Oh! you'll not be so apt to run across moonshiners down in this part of the state as if you were over on the North Carolina line in Eastern Tennessee," Elmer immediately assured him.

"So I understand," Rod remarked, nodding his head in approval.

"Which isn't saying," continued the Southern boy, "that there are no secret stills in these very hills around us. You know the poor whites down South feel that the United States Government has no right to say to them they shall not make the stuff, just as they please. And so it has always been, and I reckon suh, it always will be with them. They hate a revenue man worse than poison; and if they suspect any stranger being in touch with the authorities, it's bound to go hard with him, believe me."

"Well, we want to let it be known far and wide then, that we haven't any interest in the matter at all," Josh hastened to say, as he glanced around at the gloomy darkness that blanketed them on all sides; "because I'd just everlastingly hate to even think some fellow was aiming his rifle at me from among the rocks, or back of some tree. Rooster c'n talk about his ghosts, but a moonshiner'd make me have a cold chill quicker'n a dozen spooks."

"Then let's hope we'll have the luck not to run up against any of either brand," laughed Rod.

At that he immediately proceeded to change the subject to something of a more pleasant character; for Rod could see that both Hanky Panky and Rooster were showing decided signs of nervousness.

They continued to lounge around the cheery camp-fire for another hour or so, since it had been some little time since such an opportunity had come their way; and like most boys a fire was almost an object of worship with several of them.

But in due time there were frequent yawns that announced the coming of drowsiness; and finally Rod declared they had better get ready to turn in.

The motorcycles had been chained together. This would effectually prevent the pilfering of one or more of the wheels while the owners slept. It also gave the boys a chance to enjoy their slumbers undisturbed by vague fears that an enemy might deprive them of their means of locomotion.

"Then we ain't going to keep watch?" asked Rooster, as though surprised, perhaps a little disappointed because of the fact.

"No use, that I can see," replied Rod. "We'll be lying pretty much in a bunch, and for one, I call myself a light sleeper; so I guess if anybody started to move about here I'd know it. And we're all pretty tired. So let's go to sleep, and be fresh as daisies in the morning."

"Them's my sentiments," Josh declared; and Elmer also remarked that he did not think there was the slightest need of keeping a sentry on duty.

Rooster had made himself as cozy a bed as possible, under the circumstances, considering the fact that they had no blankets along, and a tent was one of the things that were missing. But the sky seemed clear at the time they lay down, with many stars blinking in the dark vault above; and the air was balmy, since the season chanced to be in the late summer.

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There were plenty of dead leaves handy, and with these they had fashioned their beds, packing them in as hard as they could. Rod and Elmer, yes, and Josh also, appeared to have little trouble about getting to sleep; but it was different with the other two.

First Rooster would sit up, and stare suspiciously around; and then with a grunt of satisfaction lie down again; a little later Hanky Panky might be noticed raising his head, and glancing toward the spot where the motorcycles had been parked, so that the same stout chain could be passed through the front wheel of each.

He would then look all around at the forbidding woods, as seen indistinctly in the dim light of the flickering camp-fire; after which, hearing nothing but the querulous voices of some prowling ground rats, Hanky Panky in turn rolled over.

But as the night wore on, these manifestations of uneasiness on the part of the two lads grew more and more infrequent, until they too slumbered in peace.

CHAPTER X. THE POOR MAN'S AUTOMOBILE.

"GET up, Rooster; don't you know it's broad daylight?"

"Aw! sure you're foolin' me, Josh," said the other, as he sat up and rubbed his heavy eyes with the knuckles of both hands; and then, staring around at the bustling scene, he went on to add in utter astonishment: "well, bless me if it ain't a fact; and to think of me sleepin' like a log all this time. Why, the sun's up, and I c'n smell the coffee agoin'. Guess I was makin' up for the time I lost last night in that road tavern bed. You know, Josh, I said somethin' kept me awake most all the time."

"Yes, and we believed you, too, Rooster," commented the other. "You're an easy mark, and everything takes to you, first. Right now the skeeters have been pepperin' your face like fun. But hurry, and wash up, because Rod, he called out a minute or so ago that breakfast was pretty near ready."

"Oh! tell Rod I'll be on deck; you can always depend on me to hustle when there's any eatin' goin' on. I believe in promptness at meal times. I was brought up that way, you see, Josh."

"Well, if I know you, Rooster, and I think I do, it's the only occasion you can be counted on to toe the mark on time," and with this parting shot, which made the object of the insinuation only grin, Josh turned back to his duties at the fire.

So the night in camp had passed, and nothing more had happened to bring the least sign of trouble. As they sat around, disposing of the abundant breakfast provided by the cooks of the morning, quite naturally much of the talk was of the strange events of the preceding night. They discussed the chase of the guards, and wondered whether the mulatto convict had been overhauled by the dogs.

Of course, if such proved to be the case, the only thing Yellow could do would be to climb a tree, because he would not dare attempt to enter into a fight with a pair of such ferocious animals as those tawny hounds seemed to be, especially with no other means of offense and defense than a club. And should this happen, the baying or yelping of the dogs would eventually bring the men to the spot, to make the fugitive their prisoner again.

"I'm sorry for the poor wretch, if ever he falls into their hands, though I reckon that he's a bad egg, and ought to suffer," Elmer remarked.

"Yes, when I remember the face of that short guard I feel a little that way myself," Rod went on to say. "This man

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is a tough character, I suppose, but that's no reason he should be abused if retaken; and I'm afraid that's what will happen, if that guard with the cruel face has his way."

"But, there isn't much chance that they'll run across Ajax, is there?" demanded Hanky Panky; "because, if they did, p'raps they'd think it worth while to trot back here, to ask why so many of our duds happened to be in his keeping. They'd kind of suspect that we'd been helping him get away, you see."

"Oh! forget it," observed Rod. "From what that leading guard said, they didn't care much whether they recaptured Ajax or not, because they knew he didn't amount to anything as a criminal; but it was different with the other. And now, if you have all had enough breakfast, suppose we get ready to make a flying start. From what Elmer tells me we'll like as not have a heap of trouble today, because of the poor roads, and other things."

"Yes," said Elmer, taking the subject up, "we've noticed that they must have had a pretty heavy storm around this region lately, that washed the roads badly; and they're poor enough, suh, at their best, believe me. So we'll likely have to dismount quite a few times, and walk a mile or more, pushing our machines ahead of us."

Rooster groaned at hearing that. If there was one thing he disliked to do it was walking, when he had a fine motorcycle along. It always galled him, and he was wont to declare it was as bad as having to put the horse in the carriage, and dragging the entire outfit.

But nevertheless, Rooster was able to do his duty when pushed, and while he might grunt, more or less, he always kept up with the procession. On this occasion it was very likely that he would make a special effort to do so, because of the many bad things he had heard Elmer say concerning the country through which their day's run was apt to take them.

Presently, everything being pronounced ready, Elmer started off. The road happened to have a comparatively level stretch just beyond them, before it mounted upward; and this offered a fine opportunity for getting away.

Even Rooster, although undoubtedly the poorest rider of the five, seemed to have little trouble about making a flying start; and the merry popping of the exhausts, as the boys pushed sturdily upward, announced that the expedition was under way.

Under ordinary conditions, Rod, as the leader, would have been in the van; but on account of the fact that this was Elmer's old stamping-ground which they were about to visit, and that he was supposed to be more or less familiar with conditions down here among the Tennessee mountains, Rod had, of his own free will, started in to "play second fiddle," as Elmer put it.

It was not long before they found that the Tennessee boy had been quite right when he warned them that they were likely to run up against a sea of troubles on this second day's ride through the valleys, and over the elevations that lay to the north of Chattanooga many miles.

The late storm had indeed played havoc with the roads, washing gullies in them in places, that constantly threatened the motorcyclists with disaster.

Because of this ever present peril they made slow progress during the morning. To the dismay of Rooster, the walking proved a regular thing, so that for half a mile at a stretch, and that many times, they had to climb a steep elevation, pushing those heavy machines along, and perspiring heavily.

"One thing I hope you'll conclude to do, Rod," gasped Hanky Panky, after this foot exercise had been going on for some time, and they had stopped to rest on the brow of a small-sized mountain.

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"What might that be?" asked Josh, before Rod could frame words to put the question himself.

"That we make up our minds to go back by another route," Hanky Panky went on.

"Second that motion!" hastily cried Rooster, wiping his steaming forehead with his red bandanna handkerchief, which he kept knotted about his neck, cowboy style, so he could make use of it to wipe the dust from his eyes while riding.

"Just as likely as not we will," replied Rod, cheeri "that is, if there's any choice of roads, and Elmer will know."

"Yes, leave that all to me, fellows," the one mentioned remarked, placidly.

Elmer had become very thoughtful of late, and Rod understood what that stood for. Naturally enough, the closer they drew to his old home the more his doubts disturbed the Tennessee lad. He was torn by conflicting hopes and fears, one minute feeling that he must surely find the precious papers under the hearth-stone of the house in which much of his life had been spent; and then again finding himself groping in doubt, for there seemed so many chances against success. Those words dropped by the old grandfather in his sleep, when his mind wandered back to the past, may not have had any particular significance; or even though they did refer to some hiding-place where he had secreted the valuable papers, it might be a stone in the mountains, after all.

"What a great thing these machines are, to get over ground," Josh remarked, as they began to prepare to mount again. "Why, think of it, if we had to walk all the way here from our home town, away up in Ohio. It would take us weeks, I guess."

"It would me, that I'm sure of," Rooster observed, calmly. "And the funny thing about it is that some silly people say all sorts of things about motorcycles, even calling them the most dangerous thing to be met with on the highways of the country."

"That's all because of a few harem-scarem riders, who go whirling along through villages, and everywhere else, like mad, killing chickens, and dogs, and giving everybody a bad scare," Rod declared.

"Why," spoke up Hanky Panky, "I was just reading only the other day how over in England they're used by all sorts of tradesmen, in going to and from their work, especially out among the country towns. Why, a carpenter thinks nothing of taking on a job ten miles away from home. They have fine, even roads over there, you know, and with his kit of tools fastened on his machine, he gets there in decent time, and has a lovely spin going home again, rain or shine, it makes little difference to him."

"That's using the motorcycle as it ought to be used," Rod went on to say, as he straddled his machine, and prepared to follow, when Elmer had taken the lead. "Over here most people are in such a hurry that they think they have to let things out to the last link, and go whirling along like mad."

"Now I know you're getting a little knock on me, Rod," remarked Josh, the impatient chum; "but I don't do that near so much as I used to, you'll all have to admit that."

"Yes, you're reforming a little, Josh," said Rooster.

"And you'd better quit taking those headers of yours every once in so often," was the way Josh got back at the last speaker; "you seem bent on exploring every mud hole or frog pond that happens to lie alongside the road; and because up to now luck has been with you, so that you haven't broke your precious neck, or damaged your wheel seriously, don't think it'll always be that way, Rooster."

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"Aw! people that live in glass houses oughtn't to throw stones; so I'm off after Rod and Elmer. Watch me, and see if I wobble as much as I used to. I'm getting to be a middle of the road man nowadays, you notice."

Presently the entire five were moving along nicely, as the road happened to be in pretty good shape for a couple of miles. Then once more their troubles began, and they had to alternately walk and ride.

So noon found them. Elmer had hoped they would have reached a crossroads he had marked upon his rough chart of the region he was carrying, where they would pick up some sort of a lunch; but it seemed utterly hopeless, the way things were going.

"Tell you what, fellows," he had said, when they took another turn at walking up a hill; "we'll be lucky to strike some sort of cabin along in the next mile, at which we may be able to buy a scanty meal of hog and hominy."

"Don't I wish now I had a gun along," remarked Josh; "I've seen two bevvies of quail rise up, and Elmer here says he started a lot more pa'tridges, as they call 'em down here. But say, fellows, what d'ye s'pose now, all that smoke means over the top of the rise up there?"

"And listen, would you?" exclaimed Hanky Panky, in more or less excitement, "don't you hear some sort of shoutin' too? Say, I wouldn't be s'prised now if it meant one of these here cabins was afire. Let's hurry, boys, and get to the top!"

CHAPTER XI. THE MOTORCYCLE BOYS' FIRE BRIGADE.

ALL weariness was forgotten now. They pushed the heavy motorcycles up the balance of the rise with a vim; and upon reaching the top, panting for breath, looked in the direction where the smoke was still coming up.

"It's a cabin, or something, afire, that's dead sure!" cried Hanky Panky as soon as he could catch his breath enough to speak at all.

"Sure it is," echoed Josh; "and say, Rod, we ought to get there in doubl –quick time, to lend a hand. P'raps we might help put her out."

"But look at the rotten road, would you?" said Rooster, in dismay; and only a glance was needed to tell the others that riding just there was utterly out of the question.

"We'd better make a run for it, boys," announced Rod, a few seconds later.

"D'ye mean we'll leave our machines on the road here?" asked Josh, as though the idea did not appeal wholly to him, after seeing how near Hanky Panky had come to losing his motorcycle.

"Yes," replied Rod, as he dropped his, not even taking the trouble to use the convenient stand; "and Rooster, you stay by them. You were just complaining about a pain in your side; so of course you couldn't run much. Come along, the rest of you!"

Even had he wanted to do so, Rooster could not have entered a protest, for they were gone before he could frame his thoughts into words. And so making the best of a bad bargain, he dragged a couple of the machines out of the road, so that they might not obstruct the highway, in case any vehicle came along, of which there was very little chance. Then Rooster stretched his long neck, and tried to make out the nature of the happening just beyond the bend of the road.

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Meanwhile the others had gone on as fast as they could, considering their winded condition at the time. The shouts grew in volume, too, and they could judge from the character of the cries that there must be considerable excitement around the scene of the fire, whatever, it might be that was burning.

A few minutes later, and they had arrived close enough to learn that it was a stable that was on fire; but as it connected with the cabin of the mountaineer, the chances were that the entire affair was bound to go up in flames.

There must have been some little hay in the ram-shackle stable, to judge from the dense smoke that hung over the scene, and which must have smarted the eyes of the fire fighters considerably.

Rod saw that these consisted of a couple of half-grown children, and a woman, together with a negro man who appeared so frightened that he was of little use. They were trying to dash water on the burning building, but used so little judgment in emptying their buckets in places where the flames had secured a good hold, instead of trying to concentrate on spots just ahead, that it looked as though their efforts were worse than useless.

"Get busy, fellows!" shouted Rod, as he and the other three boys reached the scene. "Find anything you can, to carry water in, and let me dash it on systematically. That's the only way to fight fire—kill it piece by piece!"

"Whoopee! we're the boss firemen!" cried Josh, as he took a bucket from the unresisting hands of a little girl who had been tugging it along, filled with water from the creek which ran close by.

All of them entered into the spirit of the work with a zest, and the way those buckets and tinpans flew back and forth from the creek to the burning building was well worth seeing. For the time being the excited boys entirely forgot that they had been complaining of being tired. Why, they made a dozen journeys between the source of water supply and the fire without once stopping. And there was Rod, standing in the breach, ready to pour the contents of each receptacle in a certain spot, where it would do the most good.

At first they had an uphill fight, for the flames had obtained a firm hold, owing to a little wind that was blowing, and the futile efforts of the family to stay them; but presently the work of the newcomers began to tell, for while smoke kept coming up just as densely as ever, less was seen of those hungry red tongues of fire.

And then, the coming of assistance, while it had startled the natives at first, soon began to put new courage in their hearts. They found other means of conveying water, in sundry vessels of a queer character, even to jugs that may have once held illicit liquor; and these being emptied into an old tub within reach of Rod, he had a new means at hand for fighting the flames.

"Get busy, uncle!" cried Josh, to the old darky, who was trotting about as if he had lost his head; "find some sort of thing that'll hold water, and help to fill that tub over there."

Thus urged, the old fellow began to search for some vessel not otherwise employed, and the last Josh saw of him he had alighted on a dilapidated tin pail, the rusty bottom of which gaped with holes. This he carefully filled at the creek, and then headed for the house, with half a dozen streams trickling after him. And by the time he arrived at his destination it was a scanty allowance that followed the upheaval of the cast-off pail. But he must have considered that he was doing his very best, for he cheerfully hobbled back again to the creek, and proceeded to make another attempt.

Elmer worked with Josh and Hanky Panky, fetching the water, so that Rod could stay the progress of the flames. He had so far paid little attention to the family that was in danger of having their humble cabin home burned to the ground, and which must certainly have had this fate come upon it, but for the fortunate coming of the motorcycle boys.

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The half-grown boy was a hunchback, but he labored as hard as anybody, and his pinched face seemed to be filled with an eager anxiety concerning the fate of his home. He had a large bucket for one of his size to "tote," but getting it on his arm by the bale, he would stagger along, grimly determined that he must not be found wanting in this grave emergency.

Rod noticed this fact, and when Josh came up again he called out to him:

"Change buckets with that hunchback boy when you meet him coming, Josh; you're better able to handle that big bucket than he is, and your's seems more of his size."

"Sure thing," was all the willing one said; and as he met the boy he took the large tin bucket from him, thrusting his smaller receptacle into his unwilling hands.

All this was, as Hanky Panky put it, "just pie," to the four chums. They worked along as cheerfully as though engaged in a most delightful pursuit; indeed, had it been a warm game of baseball, they could hardly have entered into it with more zest than they were now displaying.

Possibly some of them had seen fires fought by the volunteers of Garland, and in that way imbibed lessons that were apt to be of value to them under such conditions as these. But no matter, they were brim full of grit and determination; and if water, and then more water, could conquer the flames, they meant to supply it as long as they were able to go back and forth, and that friendly creek did not go dry.

Rod chanced to be idle for a dozen seconds. He had emptied the tub, and those who were fetching further supplies were all on the way to the creek, or else just starting toward him.

He had sized up the fire well enough by this time to know just what his plan of campaign must continue to be; for it was beginning to tell plainly by now. Hence he allowed himself to glance toward those whom the coming of the four motorcycle chums had helped.

The woman was tall and thin, as pretty much all the poor whites in the mountain sections of the South seem to be, so that a fat man or woman is rarely met with.

She had been working as hard as any one, carrying water, but just then seemed to have been seized with a sudden thought; for Rod saw her clutch hold of the girl, and say something to her, while her thin face worked with emotion.

There, she was pointing straight at him now, and asking still more questions of the girl, who continued to shake her tousled head in the negative.

Rod was filled with curiosity, and also wonder. What could the woman have suddenly thought of? Was it possible that her old man might be one of those moonshiners Elmer had been telling them about; and for the first time noticing the leggins the motorcycle boys wore, they had given her a terrible start, since she must connect them in some way with the soldiers of Uncle Sam, who may at some time in the past have been sent into these same mountains to back up a raid of the United States Marshal, when endeavoring to arrest a gang of moonshiners.

But now she had started toward him, and Rod knew that he would not be long kept in the dark concerning the motive that actuated her.

Hanky Panky came hurrying up, with another bucket of water, seizing which Rod sent the contents over the side of the cabin where the fire was trying its best to get a hold.

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Elmer was hurrying along, just behind the mountain woman. She stopped, and turned upon him, saying something that appeared to give the boy a start. More than ever was Rod interested; and vainly he tried to conjecture what had happened to arouse this new excitement on the part of the mountaineer's wife. Was she afraid her ugly-tempered "man" would come home, and find these strangers there?

But Elmer pointed toward the cabin, as though that might contain the cause of her agitation. He came hurrying toward Rod, the woman following back of him, wringing her hands, while the little girl trailed along in the rear, crying wildly.

Rod took the bucket from his chum, and shot its contents on the cabin wall.

"What's it all about, Elmer?" he demanded, as he started to hand the empty vessel back again.

"Why, d'ye know, she says she's afraid there's an old man still in there," began Elmer, looking distressed as he surveyed the smoke-filled cabin interior.

"What's that, an old man you say?" echoed Rod, himself glancing in dismay at the open doorway, through which volumes of smoke poured.

"Yes, she calls him Daddy, and I reckon now he must be her man's father, because she says he'll be crazy if anything happens to the old fellow. They thought he'd got out, and in the excitement she clean forgot all about him till just now, when the girl asked if she'd seen him. He's a cripple, you know, and must have been overpowered by the smoke. What can we do, Rod?"

"Do?" echoed the other; "there's only one thing for you and me to try, Elmer; and that's to dash inside, and find him. Here, wet this handkerchief and tie it around my mouth; I'll do the same for you, and then let's get busy!"

CHAPTER XII. THE RESCUE.

"Hi! what's going on here, tell me?" cried Josh, as he came staggering up, carrying that big bucket filled to the top with water.

"The woman says there's an old cripple in the cabin, she's afraid; and we're going in to see if we can find him," replied Rod, who was busily engaged in fastening the wet handkerchief around the breathing apparatus of his chum, Elmer.

Josh immediately began to feel of his pockets, and guessing what his intentions must be, Rod instantly put a quietus on his hopes and expectations by saying in that stern tone he assumed only when exercising his functions as the acknowledged leader of the club.

"No, you can't go along, Josh. Two of us can do the job better than three. Your intentions are all right, and do you credit, old fellow, but sure you'd only be in the way now. Stand here, and use the water as they fetch it, just like I was doing. Understand?"

Josh heaved a sigh of tremendous proportions, and then nodded his head in the affirmative. He hated the worst kind to give up anything on which he had set his heart; but doubtless his good sense told him Rod was right. The cabin consisted really only of one big room, and if there was an old man lying there on the floor, overcome by the smoke, the two who were prepared to enter could certainly find him.

"Ready, Rod?" asked Elmer, thickly, on account of the handkerchief that had been tied over his mouth and

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nostrils, so that he might be able to breathe, without inhaling much of the choking smoke.

"Yes, and there's no use waiting a second longer. Come on!" was the prompt response; at which the pair of venturesome boys immediately started to enter through the open door, where great billows of pungent smoke were curling out.

Josh stood there, ready to do his full duty; but his heart was with the two companions who had gone from sight, and only for a sense of stern duty, he would certainly have rushed after them.

He did take out a bandanna and soak it in what water lay in the tub; after which he fastened the same about his jaw. Possibly he was actuated by the conviction that unless Rod and Elmer showed up speedily, nothing was going to keep him from dashing in there after them; and if they too had succumbed to the choking smoke, his coming might be the means of saving their very lives.

Meanwhile, the two boys had found themselves so surrounded by thick smoke from the burning hay in the adjoining stable that they could not even see their hands before their faces, and were compelled to grope their way about.

Even under such exciting conditions Rod had a settled plan of campaign. It would have to be a remarkable occasion indeed that could catch him entirely unprepared with some sort of scheme.

"Take hold of my hand, and feel down close to the floor with the other," was what he shouted in Elmer's ear; and the latter instantly realized what a fine thing it was to have a chum along whose brain was fertile in expedients, so that nothing ever caught him unprepared.

In this fashion, then, the two boys began to cross the cabin floor. They might almost as well have been totally blind, for all the good their eyes did them in the midst of that stinging smoke. Indeed, both of them kept their eyes closed pretty much all the time, which was a wise thing to do, and trusted entirely to instinct to make progress in any given direction.

Several times one of them would stumble, and then it was that this thing of keeping in touch with his companion proved of especial value, because it prevented a fall.

Now they must have passed completely across the cabin, for they came up against a barrier that could only be the opposite wall. Rod was ready for even this. They had not found that which they sought, but only half the space of the floor had been covered. Turning, they must now go back again, and this time make certain that the other section came under their search.

Hardly had they made a start than both of them tripped over some object that lay extended across the floor; and unable to save themselves, they fell upon their faces; but suspecting that they had now come upon the object of their search, Rod immediately twisted his body around, and in another second had discovered that it was indeed so.

"Here he is, Elmer; quick, give me a hand!" he cried out, his voice sounding strangely heavy amidst such surroundings.

"All right; tell me what to do, Rod," called the Southern boy, who had flung himself around as quickly as he could scramble to his knees.

"Let's see if we can get him out; you take hold of his legs, and I'll try to look after his upper part."

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Of course Rod knew very well that he was taking the harder part upon himself; but then that was his usual way.

They were both young and lusty; and besides, the occasion was of a character to induce them to make unusual exertions; so that they found it no great hardship to lift the form of the old man, mere skin and bones in itself, and start toward the place where they supposed the door lay.

They must have become a little confused while getting hold of the body, for in another moment they had come slap up against a side wall; and Rod realized that in so far as one could become lost in the confined space given over to the interior of the cabin, they were in that predicament.

Even then his training in the ways of a hunter proved of more or less value to Rod; for he instantly set himself to noticing in which direction the billows of smoke were oozing; and having ascertained that to his satisfaction, he felt positive that the door lay right there.

And he was quite right in his surmise; for upon hurrying thither, they immediately began to feel relief, as the air grew less oppressive; and a few seconds later they had burst through the opening, reaching the outer air.

"Wow! here they come!" shouted Josh, all excitement.

"And they found him too, sure's you're born!" shrilled Hanky Panky; while the woman and the children uttered whimpers of delight, crowding close around.

As soon as they could lay their burden down, the two rescuers tore away the bandages that had prevented them from swallowing much of the smoke. Then they saw that the party they had rescued was a very old and wrinkled specimen of a man, with one of his legs bandaged up, as though he might be suffering with gout, only this being a rich man's disease, such a thing was beyond reason.

"Is he dead?" asked Hanky Panky, in an awed voice, and Rod saw that he would be doing more harm than good by lingering near; so he hastened to chase both Josh and Hanky away by saying:

"Not a bit of it, and now, both of you get busy again. That fire is scotched, not killed; and you want to pour a heap more water on the same right away."

Josh saw reason back of this.

"Come on, Hanky, let's get to work again. We're just bound to make that old blaze look like thirty cents. Here goes for more water," and with a wild whoop Josh ran over to where the bucket lay that he had been using, securing which he again headed for the friendly creek.

If it hadn't been for the nearness of that little gurgling stream of mountain water the chances of the cabin surviving the fire would have been next door to nothing. And as it was, it had a close shave.

Rod secured some water, and threw it in the peaked and wrinkled face of the white bearded old man. He immediately began to show signs of coming back to life; from which fact it was evident that there was still a hope of saving him; though had he remained only a little longer in that overpowering smoky atmosphere inside the cabin, nothing could have brought him to again.

When Rod saw him open his eyes he knew there was no need of lingering any longer. Better get busy again, and toss more water on that burning stable, if they were smart, and could hold out, in due course of time they might even hope to fight down the flames in there, and save what was left of that.

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"There, did you hear that shout along the road?" asked Elmer, when he came up to Rod, bearing another supply of the all-important water.

"I thought I caught some sort of call, though I wasn't sure," replied the other; "do you think it could be Rooster calling for help now?"

The thought was along lines that made Rod's nerves thrill; for it would certainly be the limit if, after all this hard work, their presence were suddenly needed in the direction of the spot where they had left their chum to stand guard over the precious motorcycles.

But Elmer shook his head in the negative.

"No, I don't think it could have been," he went on to say; "in the first place, Rod, it seemed to come from exactly the opposite direction; and then again, it wasn't in Rooster's shrill voice. I'd rather believe that it's a man, perhaps the owner of this rookery, who is coming tearing along now, as fast as he can."

"You're right, Elmer," the other declared immediately afterward; "for there he comes on the jump."

It was a bearded mountaineer who came running up, showing all signs of extreme surprise, bordering on fright; for although it was only a humble cabin out of which the smoke still poured, nevertheless it might be even more precious in the eyes of this man than many a palace would be to the money king who occupied its grandeur, for it was all that he had in the wide world; and those four humble walls comprised "home" to him.

To Rod he was just like all other lanky mountaineers he had seen while on this Southern trip through Tennessee with a lean, hatchet face, keen, glittering eyes, and holding the inevitable rifle in his grip. The woman seemed to be talking "a blue streak" to him, as Hanky Panky remarked, when delivering his supply of water a few seconds later. Rod could see the man looking toward them. No matter if he did have a far from prepossessing face, the boy felt pretty sure that he would not entertain any feeling of hostility toward the lads who had really saved not only his humble cabin from destruction, but the life of his old crippled father as well.

It was Elmer who uttered an exclamation just about then; and Rod saw that he was staring straight ahead, as though he had made some sort of discovery; but whether this would prove of a pleasing nature or otherwise, was yet to be determined.

Still, it struck the observing Rod that his chum seemed rather satisfied than otherwise; and from this he took hope.

"What is it, Elmer?" he asked, quickly.

"I don't know that is I'm hardly dead sure about it, Rod," replied the other; "but suh, I'm inclined to believe that luck was with us again in great shape when it led us to this spot, just in time to do what we did; yes, suh, that's my honest opinion."

CHAPTER XIII. WINNING A POWERFUL FRIEND

ON hearing Elmer speak in this confident way, Rod took another good look at the lanky mountaineer. He could not see anything unusual about the man, except that possibly he was taller than the average run, and had a sort of commanding air about him, such as would indicate his being in a position to act as a leader among his kind.

"Who and what is he, Elmer?" he asked, in a low tone.

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"His name is Si Keck," replied the other; "and fo' a good many years now he's always been known as the head and front of the mountain men. Some people say that he makes mountain dew, and that the revenues have tried for years to get him in the act, but up to now they've failed. Si, suh, is too sharp for them."

"But why do you say we're in great luck to have done his family this service?" continued Rod. "We don't expect to have anything to do with moonshiners, and how would this Si Keck be in a position to help us in the work you want to carry out?"

"I'll tell you," said Elmer, quickly. "As I said befo', there's always been a chance that some fool man down here would take a dislike to us, because in the first place we are strangers; and then again he'd think we were connected with the military on account of these leather leggins we wear, and the fact of our having such fine motorcycles, which have seldom, if ever, been seen around here, fo' a fact."

"Yes; go on, please, Elmer."

"Now, it's a mighty uncomfortable feeling, suh," the Southern boy continued; "you'll agree with me, to keep thinking that there may be a moonshiner hiding behind some rock, and covering you with his rifle, while his finger plays with the trigger, I confess that it might give me the creeps. But that will all be done away with now. Si Keck will see to it that nothing of the sort happens."

"Oh! now I begin to get at what you mean," declared Rod.

"Wait and see what happens, for he's heading this way right now, and I reckon he means to speak what's on his mind. Meet him squarely, man to man, Rod, and my word for it, we won't be sorry."

The tall, lanky mountaineer was advancing toward the spot where the boys stood. By now the fire had been so far subdued that it no longer menaced the cabin. The little ramshackle stable had been pretty badly burned, but thanks to the prompt efforts of the motorcycle boys, the fire had been confined to the building where it must have started.

But evidently the mountain man did not have this so much on his mind as the invaluable service they had rendered in saving his old and lame father from suffocation in the smoke that filled the cabin.

Now he was before them, and with hand outstretched. There was an actual softening of the stern, suspicious face, and his eyes were certainly humid as he spoke:

"I wanter shake hands with yuh, younkers. I hears as how yuh done me an' mine a mighty good turn. I'm 'bliged tuh ye foh savin' my cabin from burnin'; but when yuh pulled ole Daddy outen thah, yuh done somethin' I hain't never agoin' tuh forgit. He's on'y an ole an' lame man, but we sot some store by him thisaway. An' yuh kin count on Si Keck bein' yuh friend arter this."

He gravely shook hands with Elmer, Rod, Josh and Hanky Panky by turns. Rod was surprised at the way he did it, for there was no enthusiasm in his grip; indeed, that hand of the mountaineer felt like a cold thing, a frog, or something like that. But then Rod knew what a deficiency of energy there was among these people of the mountains. He understood that lack of decent food had made them fit subjects for the hookworm, and that as a rule they could muster little animation, except when engaged in a fight.

Elmer introduced himself and all his comrades. He even went so far as to tell that they were from Ohio, and down in Tennessee just for a trip on their wonderful little steel steeds,

"I used to live down here myself, Si Keck," he went on to say, seeing the other looking at him keenly, as though he might have noticed the Southern inflection to Elmer's voice, and wondered what it meant. "My people lived not

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twenty miles out of Chattanooga. You must have heard of Luther Overton, my grandfather."

The man started, and looked at him again.

"Jest what I has," he went on to say, "an' him an' me we never was friends; but I allers did think Luther was on ther squar, an' wouldn't turn a trick on a po' mountain man. So ye be ther leetle un I uster see aplayin' 'round thar? An' yuh be comin' down hyah tuh set eyes agin on ther ole place? Wall, yuh done me a good turn, boy, an' ole Si Keck ain't agoin' tuh forgit it. Some o' ther folks thought as how yuh mout be gov'ment spies, sent hyah tuh git p'intn agin us. They even done sot a trap beyant this place, meanin' tuh trip yuh up, an' smash them fine wheels o' yourn. But yuh ain't no cause tuh be worried arter this. It's all rite, I tells you, younker."

"We're sure glad to hear that, Si Keck," said Elmer, who had taken it upon himself to be the spokesman on this occasion, a position Rod was only too glad to let him fill, because of the fact that Elmer ought to know best of all just how to handle these queer people of the Tennessee mountains,

"I'm agoin' tuh let 'em know riteaway that yuh all be friends o' mine; an' if so much as a hair o' yer heads be injured, the critter as does it hes gut tuh answer tuh me," the old man went on to say, and with a certain dignity that somehow impressed Rod very much.

"Be sure that we appreciate what you say, suh, and as we ride on this day it will please us very much to feel that if any eyes watch our coming, they are those of your friends. I ought to know this country down heah; and that strangers are not wanted in the mountains, unless they can show a clean bill of health, and that they have no connection with the government service. The leather coats, and the leggins that we wear might look suspicious to some persons, who had never set eyes on a motorcycle. And as fo' the little service we were able to do you and yours, believe me it was only a pleasure to have the chance to show what we could do."

Si Keck was evidently a man of few words. He had already about exhausted his vocabulary in saying as much as he did. Nor was Rod much surprised when the man turned abruptly away, waved his hand toward his woman and the two children, still hovering over the old Daddy, and strode once more along the road.

As though an after thought had struck him, Elmer called out to him to wait, and then hurried to where he stood. They talked earnestly for at least five minutes, after which the tall mountaineer hurried away, while Elmer returned to where his comrades awaited him.

"Now where d'ye suppose he's gone?" asked Josh, when they were all together again.

"I reckon, suh, that he's meaning to send on some sort of signal to those of the mountain clan further along the road," replied Elmer.

"You mean the fellers that he said were in hidin', layin' some sort of man-trap that was calculated to upset us, and smash our machines is that it, Elmer?" Hanky Panky wanted to know, looking a bit pale as he considered what sort of trouble this might have meant for them.

"That's what I mean, suh," Elmer continued; "of course I don't know just how it might have been done. Perhaps, for instance, a big rock would suddenly let go above at a time when one of us was spinning along at a merry clip, and fill the narrow mountain road. As it would be utterly impossible for the rider to bring his motorcycle to a stop, the result would be a collision, a smashed machine, and perhaps a broken collarbone, some ribs damaged, or even a leg fractured."

"Wow! then I'm delighted to know that we came along here just when we did, and not only had the fun of acting as fire-fighters, but made a good friend of this Si Keck, who seems to be a sort of Grand Panjandrum among the

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mountain men. But when you ran after him, and talked again, did you ask him how he meant to let his pals know about us, Elmer?"

Hanky Panky had no equal in asking questions; he could tire anybody out without satisfying himself. But generally speaking, his chums were always ready to accommodate him to the best of their ability.

Elmer shook his head as he slowly replied:

"Why, no, I didn't think to ask him that, Hanky; fact is it wasn't any of my business just how he meant to do that same thing."

"But it bothers me more'n a little to guess however he *could* do it," the other continued, with his customary pertinacity; "they ain't no telegraph lines along this here road; and even if there did happen to be, I don't believe Si, or any of his friends'd know how to take or send a message by the dot-and-dash method."

"You're surely right there, suh," conceded Elmer, with a grin at the thought.

"But I guess that you, or Rod here, must have a pretty good idea just how it'd be done; and suppose you tell Josh'n me," Hanky Panky insisted.

At that Rod spoke up.

"From what I know of these mountaineers," he said, "they have a means of communicating similar to all woodsmen and Indians. This is by smoke signal. And chances are, that if we keep our eyes about us from now on, we'll be apt to notice puffs of black smoke sailing up from the top of some elevation that is looked on as a station. And the men who are lying in wait for us will read what Si Keck is trying to tell them, just as easy as a Signal Corps man in the army would take a message with the wigwag flags, or the heliograph."

"Huh! that's some interestin', let me tell you," Hanky Panky observed; "and for one I'm agoin' to keep my eyes open for signs of smoke. I'll feel a whole lot easier after I see it movin', and that's a fact."

"And seems to me," interrupted Josh, for once showing signs of caution, which was quite a novelty, the other boys thought; "we hadn't ought to try and hurry any too much. If we went booming on too fast, why, we might get to that place where the trap has been fixed even before old Si could send his message. And it's mighty important to us that he lets them boys know we're stamped with his approval mark. Tell you what, for one I don't hanker after runnin' ker-smash into a rock, and taking the consequences."

"You're right, Josh," said Rod, "and when we leave here we'll go at a slow clip right along. The time for dashing is past; and the roads down here wouldn't stand for a mile-a-minute pace either. But suppose we throw a little more water on the stable, and make sure the last spark is out. Then we can walk back to where our chum, Rooster, is waiting for us. It was too bad he couldn't have had a share in all the fun; but some one had to stand by the wheels, and his saying he had felt a stitch in his side made him the logical guardian of our machines."

Their work was quickly done, and after a few words with the woman, who also insisted in shaking hands with them all, in just the same listless way Si had done, the four motorcycle boys walked back along the road, turning the bend, and presently arriving at the place where Rooster had been left in charge of the precious machines, about half an hour before.

CHAPTER XIV. WHERE IS ROOSTER?

"HERE are the wheels, and they seem to be O. K. but where's Rooster?" Josh observed, as they all came to a halt on the spot where the five motor-cycles had been left in charge of the timid chum.

At first Rod thought Rooster must have seen them coming, and was hiding purposely, just to mystify them; for he was always up to tricks of this kind.

"Queer how he has disappeared," Hanky Panky went on to say; "better give him a call, Rod, and if he don't choose to come out, why, we c'n just go on, and leave his machine here for him."

He spoke purposely in a loud tone, as though wishing the other to hear the dire threat, which would be very likely to bring him on the scene in double-quick time. But there was no rustle of the bushes. If Rooster heard, he certainly did not mean to give in so easily.

Elmer and Rod exchanged glances.

"Let's make a bluff of it, and see if that fetches him out," the latter said in a low tone.

"Agreed," replied the Southern lad, grasping the idea Rod had in mind.

And so each took hold of his particular motorcycle, which was pushed out on the road, as if they meant to carry the threat into practice. Still no sign of the missing chum.

Rod began to feel worried. Rooster was such a hand for getting himself into all sorts of scrapes, that it seemed possible he might have wandered off, and become lost; although Rod could hardly see how that might be. Then again, if any one, a moonshiner for instance, had caught the boy off his guard, and made a prisoner of him, why would they leave the valuable wheels there untouched?

It began to look like a mystery, and Rod hated such things.

Of course no one started off; even the usually impatient Josh was content to hold up and wait, while he looked to Rod to offer a programme.

"It didn't work worth a cent, did it?" grumbled Hanky Panky, disappointed because the plan had failed; and since he had been the first to suggest abandoning the absent Rooster, he felt that it was a personal loss.

Rod again stood his machine up, in the road at that.

"Perhaps it may not be what we thought, and Rooster is not playing a trick on us after all," suggested Elmer, following suit.

"I was just thinking that," continued the other, with a line across his forehead which told of increasing anxiety.

"But whatever could have happened to him, d'ye think?" Josh was saying. "Elmer here told us that there wasn't any savage animal around this section. Then it couldn't have been a bear that dragged our poor chum off. And take it from me, Rooster would have let us hear him screechin' if anything like that'd happened. Now, I guess they ain't got eagles big enough down here to drop on a fellow, and carry him away. And though Rooster's done some fool things in his time, I just can't b'lieve he'd deliberately leave the wheels he'd been set to watch, and go wanderin' away in the woods a huntin' wild flowers, mushrooms, or anything like that."

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"Huh! you're mighty good at sayin' what he wouldn't do," asserted Hanky Panky; "s'pose you turn your wonderful intellect towards letting us know what he *did* do."

But Josh rubbed his chin, and glanced sheepishly toward Rod. It was a plain acknowledgment of his inability to give even a good guess in that direction. As so often happened, he was ready to depend on their leader in an emergency.

"Well," said Rod, quietly, as if he had made up his mind that they would better go back to first principles in this new difficulty; "let's take a look around, and see if we can find his trail, or that of any stranger. He isn't on the road, and so, as he's gone utterly, he must have walked into the woods on the same side as the wheels were left."

Both he and Elmer busied themselves; yes, and even the other two stooped over, and made out to be similarly employed, though their knowledge of woodcraft was so limited that it must be a pretty plain track that could catch their attention.

"Here it is," said Rod, in a few minutes.

He had widely started to make a half circle around the spot where the wheels had been' found at the time they arrived on the ground, after putting out the fire.

The others hastened to his side, and quickly saw the mark which Rod declared was made by Rooster's shoe; though how he could be so sure on this score neither Hanky Panky nor Josh understood, until they were shown an odd mark, as of a crescent, in the imprint of the heel. Then they suddenly remembered what they had up to now utterly forgotten that Rooster had driven nails in each of his heels so as to form this representation of a young moon; at the time he had declared it would keep him from slipping, and make his shoes last longer.

Rod had noticed this long ago, and as soon as he wanted to make sure that Rooster had made certain tracks he simply remembered the crescent mark.

And so, day by day Josh and Hanky Panky were learning the value of using their eyes, and their brains at the same time.

"Yes, Rooster's been along here, for a fact," the former asserted, as soon as his attention had been called to the singular mark.

"And goin' away from the wheels, too," added Hanky Panky; "now, I never would a thought that of our chum. I reckon him to be a faithful comrade. To think of the silly leavin' our machines lyin' here, while he chased after a bumble-bee. P'raps he thought he'd discover a hive full of honey, he's that green. And now here we have to postpone everything, and just busy ourselves huntin' him up. It's a burnin' shame, that's what."

"Wait!"

It was Rod who uttered that one word, He was holding up his hand, and Elmer thought he seemed to be listening intently.

"Do you hear him shoutin' for help, Rod?" demanded Hanky Panky, almost in a panic.

"Perhaps we'd better give him one call, before we start to try and follow his tracks," suggested Rod, with a suspicion of a smile hovering about his lips.

"Let me do that, because you know I'm the boss shouter!" said Josh.

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As Rod nodded assent, he put his hands to his mouth, so as to form a megaphone, and bellowed the words:

"Hey! Rooster, where *are* you at?"

"Here. What's all the blooming row about?" said a voice; and with that the bushes close by parted, to disclose Rooster in the act of staggering toward them, rubbing both eyes with his knuckles, and exhibiting all the signs of one who had just been rudely aroused from a sound sleep.

Josh stared, and then turned on Rod to exclaim:

"You knew he was lying there asleep, sure you did, Rod; and you fooled me into wastin' my good breath for nothing."

"Well, I thought I heard heavy breathing somewhere close by, and could give a good guess what had happened to Rooster, for I know he didn't get all the sleep he wanted last night. If he'd been lying on his back, now, and started to snoring, none of us would have been bothered to tell where he was hidden. But it's all right, since we're saved the bother of a hunt through these woods."

"He ought to be court martialed, and shot for sleeping on his post of duty," declared Hanky Panky, pretending to be tremendously indignant, when, to tell the truth, it was a matter of very little importance to him.

"Did you get the fire out, boys?" demanded Rooster, thinking it best not to pay any attention to this sort of talk; especially since he knew he was guilty, and could not offer any decent sort of excuse for his conduct.

So they had to tell him about what had happened, feeling a bit sorry because he had been deprived of having a share in all the excitement and fun; for to the average boy a house on fire means just so much of a frolic trying to put it out, or salvage the contents.

And when the subject of big Si Keck was brought up, Rooster expressed his satisfaction over the fact that they would have the moonshiner for a friend.

It was discovered at the last moment that one of the machines needed some little attention, so that the rest of the boys threw themselves down on the ground while Josh got busy. None of them seemed impatient, for it would be just as well that the mountaineer was given plenty of time to send his message along to those in hiding, so that they would not molest the motorcycle boys when they came up.

Elmer and Rod chanced to be close together, and the latter took advantage of the fact to question his chum.

"Perhaps," he went on to say, "you wouldn't mind telling me what it was you hurried after Si Keck to talk with him about, Elmer; that is, unless it isn't any of my business?"

"I hope, now, you won't think that I'd want to keep anything from you, old fellow," the Southern boy replied, warmly, and his eyes spoke much more than these few words implied. "I expected to tell you all about it at the first chance; and I'm real glad you mentioned it now."

"It might be I could give a clever guess, that would bring that Colonel Pepper into the game?" remarked Rod, with a chuckle.

"And believe me, suh," declared the other, quickly, "that would have been hitting the right nail on the head, because it was about that same party I was making inquiries. Si Keck informs me that the same colonel is something of a mystery around these regions. He certainly has nothing to do with the mountain men, though

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careful not to get their ill-will in any way. But there is something mysterious about him. He comes and goes, and there are times when strange men ask the way to his place, and are seen going away again in a day or two. Si Keck says they always carry hand-bags along with them, and of the same size."

"I should think these suspicious mountain men would want to investigate, under the belief that this Northern colonel might be some sort of secret agent for the Government, and that the men who came to see him were spies," Rod remarked, as if the subject had a tremendous interest for him.

"Well, that could hardly be, because, you see, several men who are well known in the mountains have vouched for this colonel. They've puzzled over it a long time now, and all sorts of theories have been suggested, but Si Keck says they're just as much in the dark as ever. He feels it, because somehow the colonel has never thought to take him into his confidence. But from what he told me, Rod, I somehow or other got the idea fastened in my head that there's something queer going on at my old home. And since my mission down here is bound to take me under that same dear old roof again, perhaps, now, we may be able to find out for ourselves just what it is."

"I wonder," mused Rod; but at that moment neither of the motorcycle boys dreamed of what exciting adventures they were fated to meet up with in trying to carry out the plan conceived by Elmer.

CHAPTER XV. A HINT OF A MYSTERY.

"SEE here, Elmer, did you tell Si anything about what had brought you down here?" Rod went on to ask, as though he strongly suspected that such a thing might have come to pass.

Elmer looked a trifle confused.

"Perhaps now, Rod, you may think I was silly to say anything about my hoping to get a valuable paper, but somehow it just slipped out," he confessed, "I understand these people down heah, suh, and know that hosses couldn't make Si betray a confidence like that, and especially after we've done so much fo' him. Besides, I had a reason fo' doing it. After hearing what he had to say about this strange Colonel Pepper, it struck me we might be up against a pretty hard proposition, in trying to tackle him, and get a chance to investigate under his hearth-stone. And in that case, why, it might come in handy to call on Si Keck and some of his mountain friends to assist us, you see."

Rod caught his breath; then he reached over, and squeezed the hand of his chum.

"Not a bad idea, Elmer, I declare if it is," he observed, seriously. "If this man who lives in your old home is so much of a mystery around here, we might find we'd bitten off more than we could chew when we tackled him; and then, as you say, it'd be comforting to know we could call on Si and his men for help. But what did he tell you?"

"Promised to be not far away from the place, and gave me a signal that would bring help if it was needed," the other replied, feverishly. "Between you and me, Rod, I have a pretty good idea that Si is yearning to see with his own eyes what is going on under that roof; and that is one reason fo' him offering to be what Hanky Panky here would call 'Johnny-on-the-spot.' But all the same I know he does feel grateful to us for what we did."

"I'm ready now, any time you fellows say the word!" called out Josh, just then.

Rod and Elmer got on their feet, seeing which, Hanky Panky and Rooster followed suit; for they had been amusing themselves in a game of mumble-the-peg, to pass the time away. Had it been followed up to its logical conclusion there was not a doubt in the world but what Rooster would have had to draw the peg with his teeth,

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after it had been driven flat with the surface of the ground; for he always had the hard luck to become the victim, no matter how faithfully he labored to win.

Once again did Elmer occupy the position of leader, on account of his being more familiar with the characteristics of the country, and the nature of the mountaineers than any of his chums.

It was no "snap," as the rest of them well understood; and especially after having learned about the trap that had been arranged for their undoing further along the mountain road.

What if, after all, Si Keck, despite his good intentions, was unable to get in communication with his followers, who, believing that the boys were enemies, would proceed to carry out the original programme? That meant the ever present chance of the leader running slap against a tremendous rock, that was to be sent down across the road at a narrow point, and too late for him to avoid striking up against it.

Elmer recognized that he was taking chances, but he was not the one to betray the first sign of nervousness when confronted with danger. They may have faults, these boys who are born down in Dixie, but timidity is not among the number. Their fathers and grandfathers proved this by the valor shown on many a bloody battlefield in the dreadful war between the States.

Rod kept as close behind his chum as seemed proper. As the pace was not to be a fast one, he was able to do this, and be in a position to call out, if by chance he sighted anything that looked threatening ahead.

As they passed the spot where the cabin stood that had been saved from the flames by the valor of the motorcycle boys, Rooster came near having an accident; because he kept twisting his neck around, to see all there was, and trying to answer the cheery signals of the hunchback boy and the little girl with the tousled hair; but luckily no damage was done, and presently they had left the scene far behind.

They had been on the move only ten minutes when Elmer was seen to be making suggestive motions, as though trying to call their attention to something off on the left.

And upon looking in that quarter, when the trees opened up, so that they could catch a glimpse of the uplands, they speedily saw what it was he wished them to notice. A column of black smoke was climbing straight up toward the heavens, for at the time there chanced to be not the slightest puff of wind.

Even as they looked it suddenly stopped, there was a brief interval, and then once again did the column begin to ascend. This was repeated again and again, until the boys had counted seven distinct smokes. Then the column again arose undisturbed, though at the moment they lost sight of it, when the trees interfered, the series of smoke puffs had started in once more, as though old Si wished to repeat his message.

And every one of the motorcycle boys breathed easier; for they felt positive that this was a message of good will toward them, that was being forwarded ahead to the men in waiting; and if they read it correctly, there would be nothing doing in the nature of a surprise, when Rod and his chums arrived on the spot.

It chanced that Elmer remembered hearing Rooster say he was thirsty, for he had not been along at the time they were busily engaged carrying water from the little roadside stream to the burning stable. Consequently, when he again discovered the creek close by, he held up his hand as a sign that he meant to stop.

The others were a little excited as they too came to a halt.

"What's doing, Elmer?" asked Hanky Panky.

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"Have they blocked the road, after all?" asked Rooster, showing signs of alarm.

"Nothing of the sort, suh, believe me," came the reply; "I just happened to remember that you were complaining of being mighty dry; and as I wanted a drink myself, and we were in no great hurry, I thought we could be accommodated right heah."

"Good for you, Elmer!" exclaimed Rooster, as he dropped his machine on the turf alongside the road, and hastened to find a place where the water looked cool and inviting, so that he could get down on hands and knees, and indulge in a good long drink.

Hardly had he started to do so when he was heard to utter a cry.

"Look at that snake, would you, fellows?" he exclaimed; "say, somebody grab up a stick, and whack him with it. He must have been right close by when I dropped down on my marrowbones. What if I'd stepped on him? Ugh! tell us, what sort of a snake is it, Elmer? Do you have rattlers down here in Tennessee; because that looks mighty like one to me."

Hanky Panky had a great aversion to snakes of all kinds. He would never touch even the most harmless of the species. Even the feel of a cold frog always gave him a shiver he avowed. And so he was the first to spring back, while both Josh and Rod began to look for a pole of some sort.

"Get it long enough, Josh," said Rod, "because that is a rattlesnake, sure as you're born, and a pretty good-sized one for these mountains. Am I right, Elmer?"

"Yes, it's just what you say, Rod; although I've seen only one or two in all the years I lived around here. But they're just as deadly as in any other part of the country. A rattler is a rattler, whether you find him, big and sluggish down in Florida, the diamond-back kind; or one of those spry ones they tell us live on the plains, and make their homes in the burrows of prairie dogs. Now, make a sure job of it, Josh; and keep as far away as you can."

"Will he jump at me, then?" demanded the one who had the long stick.

"Oh! no," replied Rod; "a rattlesnake never does that. He always whips himself into a coil as soon as he thinks there's danger around, and holds his head poised, as well as his tail, with its rattles. Then he strikes out viciously, and if he fails to hit anything, of course he'll throw himself half his length or more; but he never runs at his enemy just gets back in coil as quick as he can. Watch, now, how he makes that little rattle-box go when you poke him with the stick! See him hit it with his hollow fangs, would you? Whew! that was a crack, all right, and the chances are, if you looked, you'd find the end of your stick covered with a nasty green fluid. That's the deadliest poison known. There'd be mighty little hope for any of us pulling through, if that reptile ever had a chance to inject some of it in our veins. But you'd better finish him, Josh."

"Yes," said Hanky Panky, who was looking very nervous, and somewhat white too; "I don't fancy watching you play with that forked lightning, Josh. What if this one *should* be a jumper, and make a flying leap at any of us? Please give him a whack, and make him be good."

"I suppose you mean that the only good rattler is a dead one," chuckled Josh, as he got ready to comply with the request of his chums; "they used to say that about the Indians out West; but now people've found that they make good citizens, and thousands of the noble red men are cultivating their farms, my dad says. But because the heel of man has got to bruise the serpent's head always, I'm agoin' to knock this fellow silly. There, take that, will you?"

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He brought his heavy stick around with such tremendous force that, striking the upraised head of the snake, he sent the reptile five feet away. Hanky Panky gave a little squeal, and started to run, as though under the impression that it was now about to attack them all; but seeing Josh pounding it at a lively rate, he conquered his timidity, and watched the process of winding up the career of that one rattler.

But Rooster was very careful, as he bent down to get his drink, to look around, so as to make absolutely certain that the mate of the reptile could not be hiding behind some stone or root, ready to avenge the death of Josh's victim.

Josh, having dispatched the snake, managed to sever its rattles, which he declared he meant to keep as a trophy.

"Yes," said Hanky Panky, as they prepared to start on again, "it will always remind you of how brave you were, Josh, whacking at the snake that Rod told you never jumped; and finally after a terrible combat, slaying the monster."

"Aw! let up on that, Hanky," said Josh, with a little grin on his face; "what it might remind me of is the way you shriveled up, and looked for a tree, as soon as you heard there was a snake around. I don't claim to have done anything worth mentioning, and my chest ain't agoin' to stick out every time I look at this rattle; but it will bring this scene back to my mind; and I'll laugh to think what a silly you are about snakes."

Of course Hanky Panky subsided after that, and presently the five machines were popping away again, as the motorcycle boys resumed their journey southward, toward the spot where Elmer's old-time home stood among the trees of Walnut Ridge.

CHAPTER XVI. NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T!

It was soon evident to the other boys that Elmer could be in no mood for hurrying on this particular day. He seemed to fairly loiter at times, as though desirous of killing time.

They could easily guess the reason for his tarrying on the way. Evidently, for some good reason, Elmer did not wish to arrive in the vicinity of his former home until a certain time; and knowing just how much further they would have to wheel, he was regulating his speed to suit the distance.

But if they did make several stops, and navigate the wretched road on foot, pushing their motorcycles ahead of them, this gave the five lads an opportunity to do more or less talking; and boys enjoy an exchange of opinions about as well as any of their sisters may do.

Rooster was not saying much, for a wonder. He seemed to have received something of a little shock, after watching the contortions of that venomous rattlesnake, finally killed by Josh; and every time they chanced to be on foot, it might be noticed that Rooster eyed both sides of the road suspiciously. And once, when the comrade who was ahead of him happened to strike a detached vine, that was projecting a foot or so into the road, causing the other end to vibrate amidst the dead leaves close to Rooster, the boy who was so much afraid of snakes could not repress a low cry of alarm; which, however, he managed to hide in a cough, as he quickly guessed the true nature of the movement.

But if Rooster was rather depressed in spirits, Hanky Panky seemed to grow more lively the further they advanced. There were times when he could apparently hardly hold himself in; and only for the fact that Rod was so close by, with that questioning look on his face at times, Hanky Panky might have even burst out into a jolly song.

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He was a boy of moods, and one of his gay spells had come upon him, it seemed. So long as he did not let it overpower him, to such an extent as to interfere with any plan Elmer might have in mind, Rod was not the one to interfere; for like all the others he dearly enjoyed seeing the amusing antics of this frisky chum, when he happened to be "on his high horse," as Josh called it.

"If you're just bound to have it out, Hanky, old fellow," Josh was saying, late in the afternoon, when there was some talk about spending another night camping on the roadside, "the sooner you get busy the better. What sort of trick have you got up your sleeve now, hey? Goin' to show us how to cook eggs in a hat? Wish you would, because we ain't got never a single egg handy, and if you could produce a nice omelette now, I think I'd enjoy it just immense. How about that, boys?"

"So say we all of us!" chimed in the others, in chorus; but the wizard waved a hand at them, and shook his head sadly.

"Go easy with me, fellers," he said. "How c'n I produce an omelette when there ain't a single egg to be had? There are lots of stunts I might pull off; but say, that's beyond me, sure it is. Wisht I thought of it, an' just hid a few of the hen fruit away to sort o' surprise you right now; but I didn't. But I've got something new to show you, somethin' I ain't done before. Wait till we get located for the night, and if I c'n find a good high stand, where you all c'n see me, I'll do my little turn."

"Well, I think I see our camp-ground ahead there, right now," remarked Elmer, to whom the ordering of things had been entrusted by the regular leader, since this was really his "funeral," as Josh called it.

"For one I ain't a bit sorry," announced Rooster, who was just about "played out," from being compelled to push his heavy motorcycle over so many rises, on account of the torn-up condition of the road after the recent storm, rendering it a risky operation to try and ride over such rough ground, where a fall might mean a bad plunge into some ditch, or over a little precipice possibly.

"I only hope that we've got enough grub to see us through till to-morrow," Josh sighed; "not that I couldn't stand fasting as well as the rest of you, understand; but as a rule I don't hanker after going without my regular allowance of bacon, and grits, which down here they call hog and hominy."

"Oh! no danger of our starving, I guess, Josh," Rod assured the anxious one. "I saw to storing away a little extra supply in this bundle that I've got strapped to my machine here. Nothing like looking out for an emergency, you know."

"Good for you, Rod; if I didn't have both hands employed right now blest if I wouldn't feel like throwing up my cap, and giving a yell!" ejaculated Hanky Panky, who had listened to this side talk with a peaked look on his face; for as was well known, the boy who liked to practice tricks, and balance on all sorts of odd places when showing off his nimbleness, also dearly loved the sound of the supper call; Hanky was usually the first to begin eating, and the last to clean out the frying-pan, whenever the motor-cycle boys camped out.

"Well, I wouldn't do anything like that if I were you, suh," cautioned Elmer, as he turned to look at the speaker, and shook his head. "In fact, I was just about to ask you all, as a personal favor, not to make any more noise after this than you could help."

"Whee! what's the trouble, Elmer; are we apt to stir up a hornet's nest then? Would these lanky mountain men get mad if a Northern boy came down here, and let off a little surplus steam in a war whoop or two?" asked Josh.

"Partly that, suh," replied Elmer, smiling in spite of himself; "and then again, we happen to be not a very great ways off from my old home; and I think it would be a good plan not to tell everybody inside of five miles that we

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chance to be around. You see, suh, my plans are not all made up just yet. I want to talk things over with Chum Rod before we make another move."

"Nuf sed, Elmer," Hanky Panky hastened to call out; "I'll just keep that yell for some time later on, when you think there's no danger. But if I promise to behave, and put a bridle on my tongue, I guess nobody's agoin' to object to my showin' my new little trick when we get stalled."

A few minutes later, and the five boys came to a halt,

It was only the middle of the afternoon, but all of them felt more or less tired and welcomed the chance to lay aside their machines, for a time at least. Elmer admitted that he had by accident chosen the worst road that could have been picked out. Needing repair very badly, it had undoubtedly suffered to a greater extent in the recent storm than any of the others.

"When we go back north again," he assured them, as they saw to placing their motorcycles in a safe place, and once more chaining them together so as to prevent a repetition of the robbery of a wheel; "we will take another course, I give you my word, suh. There was a time when this used to be the best route around heah; but I've found out now that times have changed. That man of the cabin on the rock was right when he told us that fact."

"And for one I'm right glad to hear that, Elmer," declared Rooster. "P'raps now I'm a poor rider, when you compare me with the rest of the bunch; but no matter, I'd much sooner take my chances in the saddle than tire myself out pushin' all this weight up-hill, ever so many times a day."

"And as we ain't got a tent, why, makin' camp's as easy as jumpin' off a log," observed Hanky Panky, as he began to look curiously around him, with the air of a circus manager who has located his "round-top," and wishes to ascertain what especial advantages the spot may possess for showing purposes.

When Hanky Panky once got a notion in that stubborn head of his, it was hard indeed to dislodge the same. He had chosen to promise them a new exposition of his powers as a necromancer, and a nimble acrobat, and his first thought was to discover a platform from which they could with comfort view his act. Hanky Panky was lately developing the "show" instinct very strongly; when he had anything unusual to offer his mates it was not enough that he turn and play the game. He preferred to excite their curiosity by certain preliminary movements calculated to stamp the little affair with an air of mystery.

If a stone wall were handy he never failed to clamber to its top, and there, take up his position. For Hanky Panky had learned the first rule of a conjuror, which was to have a little distance between himself and his argus-eyed audience; and if possible perform his tricks from an elevation. Looking upward on the part of his audience serves to aid the magician in his magic passes, and in deluding the observer.

So Hanky Panky, on discovering the stump of a very large tree, that stood about ten feet from the ground, allowed his eyes to linger there. He wondered whether it might not be possible for him to climb up, and make the top of that broad stump serve as a platform. Why not, when there were several fragments of former limbs still sticking out from the remnant of the trunk of the forest monarch?

And accordingly, the wizard commenced climbing upward, watched curiously by his four comrades; who however, knowing his weakness for display could give a pretty good guess as to what he meant to do.

When the climber managed to finally reach the top of the stump he found, much to his satisfaction, that it presented quite a flat surface, and if he were careful not to trip, it would be possible for him to utilize this as his platform or forum.

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"Here you are now, gentlemen," Hanky Panky began to say, as he stood erect, and looked down quizzically at the rest, standing there with upturned faces, for they always expected to be amused when he went to such great trouble to place himself, as he was now doing; "and now, if you'll just keep your eyes fastened on me, I'll endeavor to show you one of the most remarkable tricks you ever heard tell of. It has puzzled all the crowned heads of Europe; and those who have had the pleasure of seeing a famous performer practice the same, unite in declaring that no one but a Hindoo magician could have conceived such a marvelous display of sleight of hand."

"Oh! hurry up and do something," groaned Josh, who was always in a hurry.

"Give a feller a little time, can't you?" demanded Hanky Panky, leaning forward, and shaking his forefinger at the offender. "'Tain't fair to bait the animals in the menagerie that way, I leave it to Rod if it is. Now, pay attention to what I'm agoin' to do, for you never before saw such a splendid display of 'now you see it, and now you don't.' Keep your eyes fixed on me, feller citizens, and watch how I swaller this here hatchet, first of all. Now, presto, hanky panky, here you have it, and in the twinkling of an eye "

He did not have a chance to complete his sentence, for just then his support seemed to suddenly give way beneath the wizard. The last the four others saw of the wonderful magician, Hanky Panky, was when his arms flew up over his head, and he vanished from their sight, dropping down into the heart of the hollow stump of the decayed forest monarch!

And for several seconds a dead silence followed this unexpected performance.

CHAPTER XVII. THE HELPING HAND.

THEN Josh laughed aloud.

"Well," he remarked, "of all the funny stunts that wizard has ever shown us, this one sure takes the cake; but that old hatchet came mighty near givin' me an ugly clip on the head when he dropped it."

"There's only one Hanky Panky, and we've got him along with us," Rooster went on to say; although he had been so much astonished at the sudden and unexpected disappearance of the boy who had stood on the top of the stump, that for a brief space of time he could hardly catch his breath; but now he too began to gurgle with the first symptoms of amusement.

"Hold on," said Rod, looking a bit serious; "I've got an idea that Hanky Panky wasn't dreaming of that thing giving way, when he told us to keep our eyes on him, and see a remarkable sample of something disappearing."

"Oh! is that so, Rod?" exclaimed Rooster, looking surprised again; "do you really mean that it wasn't meant to be, and that he broke through by accident?"

"I'm afraid so," replied the other.

"It ought to be easy enough to find that out, suh," remarked Elmer."

Josh had already started to climb up the stump, when he paused.

"Just how, Elmer?" he questioned. "By asking him that same thing; Rod, you try and see if he answers," the Southern boy went on to say.

Accordingly, Rod stepped a little closer to the prison, which now held their humorous companion, and raising his

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voice, called:

"Hello! there, Hanky Panky, ahoy!"

Rooster at the same time rapped sharply on the tree trunk with his knuckles, as though he were beating a lively tattoo on a door panel.

"Hey! Rod, that you talkin' out there?" came in a strangely muffled voice. "You don't know how queer it sounds just like you might be half a mile away."

"Are you hurt, Hanky?" demanded Rod, first of all.

"Oh! not so much, I guess," came the reply. "P'raps I got a few scratches, and one of my elbows feels some sore; but that don't count! What's botherin' me right now is, how am I agoin' to get up out of here again?"

"Oh!" said Josh, unable to resist the temptation to "put his oar in" just at this juncture, "then you never bothered your noddle how you'd get out when you started in to show us the grand disappearing act, did you, Hanky?"

A little interval of silence followed, as though the prisoner of the stump might be pondering over matters; then once again he called out in that hollow way:

"Say, don't tell me you thought I did that stunt apurpose? I hope I ain't that big a fool, to risk my blessed old neck tryin' to get up a laugh. Why, I was just as much s'prised as the next feller when she gave way under me. Didn't you see how I tried to grab hold of the top, and it was so rotten it just broke off in chunks. Where am I anyhow; d'ye think you c'n get me up again the same way I came down? Hope I don't have to stay in here all night, now. It's so narrow I c'n hardly turn around. And I feel like I'm agoin' to sneeze all the time. Achew! achew! achew! Rod, think up some way to rescue me, won't you, please?"

The four boys outside exchanged glances, and then all of them laughed; for the situation was really so comical even Rod could not keep sober any longer. Of course, had Hanky Panky really been hurt in any way, that would have put another face on the matter; but he had already confessed to the contrary.

"Go on, and laugh all you want to, fellers," the prisoner of the hollow tree was heard to call out, which indicated that he must have caught the sounds that accompanied their merriment, though none of them ventured to laugh very loud, remembering Elmer's caution; "Guess I c'n stand it, so long as you turn to, like good ones, and haul me out of this hole. And next time I want to show off, when I've got a new trick up my sleeve, believe me, I ain't goin' to pick out any old stump for a platform, not if I know it."

"Just hold on a little, Hanky!" called Rod, "and we'll talk it over. I've no doubt but what we'll think up some way to get you out of that. If the worst comes, why, there's that hatchet you dropped, you know. We can start to work, and chop a hole in the side of the stump, big enough for you to crawl through."

"Oh! try and think of some way better'n that, Rod, please," the prisoner called out. "I'm afraid it'd be an everlastin' long job, with that little camp hatchet, because, you see, the sides of the old thing feel like they might be half a foot or so through, down here, and not so rotten either."

"Then how about rigging up some sort of a rope, and lowering the same down to you, Hanky?" asked Josh, who was only too well pleased to have a hand in the work of rescue.

"That would be a good idea," came the reply, in an eager tone of voice; "but before you lower it, make a loop in the end, so I can get my arms through; because it's so close quarters down here I couldn't do much, you see."

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"All right, we'll look out for that, old top!" said Josh, dropping back again to the ground.

As they did not have such a thing as a rope along with them, it became necessary to arrange some sort of makeshift to take the place of one. This Rod was able to do by tying several garments together, until he believed he had the proper length.

"I think I'd better climb up there with you," Josh remarked, as he saw that the other had managed to gain a position near the top of the ten-foot stump. "It'll be a pretty hard pull, getting a dead weight up out of the hole. Hello! Hanky, are you ready to dig your knees in the sides, and help all you can; because we won't be able to do our level best, you see, hanging to the side of the old stump?"

"Sure I am," came from the prisoner; "and Rod, I think I c'n do a heap that way, once you give me a helpin' hand. But for goodness sake alive, don't you let me drop back after I get near to the top."

"You can depend on us to hold on, Hanky," Josh called down the black chute, as he waited for Rod to join him.

When both managed to fix themselves as solidly as the conditions allowed, which was not saying very much after all, the makeshift rope was lowered into the cavity. Presently the unseen chum announced that he had seized it.

"Hold on till I say when, fellers!" he begged, as if afraid that they might jerk the life-line out of his eager clutches. I've got to fix it somehow around my body under my arms, so I c'n have free play. Now, I guess it's all right; and you might give a gentle little starter."

Rod and Josh, acting in unison, did not take long in helping the lost chum reach the top of the stump; and then Hanky was shown how to crawl out without trusting too much to the treacherous crumbling wood that went to form the margin.

So the three of them dropped down to the ground, Rooster waved his cap, and made out to crow, although no sound came from his lips; for Elmer had plucked at his elbow, as if to remind him of the value of silence just then.

Rod was a little anxious to make sure that Hanky had received no serious injury by reason of his fall. There were several minor scratches that bled a little; but the other, after feeling of his limbs and sides, again announced that he was "all right."

"But fellers, you'll excuse me, I know, if I postpone that little performance of mine until another time," he went on to say; "and I'm tellin' you, that after this I'm agoin' to make sure the platform's sound before I start in to do another circus act. That disappearing job may have looked funny enough to you, but it was a big surprise to me. Say, I really thought I was bound for China, the way I slipped down that chute. And let me tell you, I wondered whether I'd land on a bear, or a snake. Yes, sir, I seemed to think of a heap of things in that little second while I was scratching along down inside that old stump."

"I've been there myself, and know how that feels," Rod remarked, sympathetically.

Hanky Panky immediately stretched himself out on the ground, as though his violent exertions might have added to his weariness. All his friskiness seemed to have disappeared, after meeting up with his singular little adventure.

"I guess I'm follered by some sort of a jinx," he was heard to grumble, as he sat there, rubbing his shins and elbows, with a grimace, as though they pained more than he had been willing to admit; "seems like when I want to show off any, something sure's agoin' to happen. Remember that time I slipped off the lock, and fell right ker-chunk into the canal basin, with my clothes on, too? But even that sort of thing ain't goin' to discourage me. Success never was won in a day. And I'm bound to keep on trying to get to the top round of the ladder, if I have to

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break a dozen ribs adoin' the same."

"I like your nerve, anyhow, Hanky Panky," admitted Josh. "You do a heap of stunts that make us laugh; but nobody ain't got anything on you when it comes to being set in your way, and stickin' everlastingly to it. But who d'ye think that is, acomin' along the road back there, on horseback, too? No mountain men about that pair, let me tell you. Think it might be this here Colonel Pepper, Elmer?"

The Tennessee boy was also eagerly watching the approach of the two men. They seemed to be fairly well dressed, as though they were gentlemen; certainly nothing about them might be taken as evidence that they belonged to the class of poor whites who had their cabin homes among the mountains of the region.

"No, because as I remember him, suh, Colonel Pepper was a man with a black mustache, and hair of the same color; and you can see for yourselves that both these gentlemen are fair. I'm sure I don't know who they can be; but they seem to be already interested in us, for I saw one of them point this way, and now they are talking rapidly, as they draw in their hosses. I reckon, now, that they might take a notion to stop a bit, and satisfy their curiosity, And if you will allow me, I would like very much to do most of the talking."

"That goes without saying, Elmer," remarked Rod, immediately; "and I'm sure I speak for all the rest of the crowd. You belong down here, and know the people better than any of the rest of us do. And it's your business we're on, right now. So go ahead, and manage things any way you think best."

"Thank you, suh," replied the Southern boy, gravely.

Then they lapsed into silence, all of them watching the coming of the two unknown riders; and possibly all sorts of strange theories flitting through the brains of Rooster and Hanky Panky concerning the identity of the strangers.

In another minute the pair drew rein just in front of the parcel of boys; and their eyes seemed to range from the motorcycles to their young owners, with what Rod thought was an exchange of suspicious glances.

CHAPTER XVIII. UNDER SUSPICION.

"WHAT d'ye make of them, Elmer?" asked Josh, after the two horsemen had trotted on once more. They had exchanged a few sentences with Elmer, acting as the spokesman for the party, and of course asked what brought the boys down here on such expensive motorcycles as the ones they saw parked close by. Elmer had simply replied that they were on a little pleasure tour, and expected to go no further than Chattanooga. As the bad condition of the road had tired out some of them, with the walking that became necessary, they had concluded to stop over, and leave their arrival at the bustling city near the foot of Lookout Mountain until another day.

"Well, to tell you the truth, suh," replied Elmer, "I hardly know what to think. They may be, just as they said, gentlemen from the city, taking a ride through the mountains. Then again, it struck me that they looked as if they didn't just swallow all I told them. I saw them give each other a wink several times."

"Just what I was agoin' to say, Elmer," remarked Josh. "And believe me, whoever they may be, they look on us with *suspicion*, as the book has it. Don't know just why they should, unless they thought Hanky and Rooster here had a sorter hangdog appearance that gave us all away."

"Huh! after seeing you, they wouldn't bother paying any attention to the rest of us, I'm thinkin'?" grunted Hanky Panky in high dudgeon; for he rather prided himself on his frank and honest looks.

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Rod was apparently thinking deeply; and he scratched his head as though something managed to elude his grasp, as he went on to say:

"I feel about the same way as you do, Elmer; and that those men, whoever they may happen to be, are puzzled to account for our being down here. You see, the riding is so punk that it doesn't seem as though anybody with a grain of sense would come along this road on a motorcycle, when he might turn back and try another road."

"Then you don't think they believed what I told them?" asked Elmer.

"They seemed to have some trouble in swallowing it, looked like to me," was what Rod replied.

"But who d'ye s'pose they c'n be?" asked Rooster, looking down the road where the two mysterious horsemen had disappeared.

Elmer shook his head.

"I reckon, now, you'll have to ask me something easier than that, suh, if so be you expect me to answer it. I never saw either of the parties befoah; and to tell you the truth, I don't believe they belong around heah. I know a Southern man every time, when I meet up with one; and if you asked me I'd most positively say both of those men came from the No'th."

"Yep," broke in Hanky Panky, "and let me tell you, they was some interested in the bundles we've got tied on our wheels. I say so because both of 'em squinted that way more'n a few times, like they'd give somethin' to know what we carried along with us. Mebbe they wanted to ask, but felt a bit backward about seemin' to be too inquisitive."

"Hardly that, Hanky," Rod observed; "because, if I'm any judge of men, neither of them looked like he might be timid. If they didn't ask any more questions, it was from another cause. Perhaps we'll find out some day; and then again we may never know."

"But they rode away in the direction of the city, didn't they?" asked Rooster.

"Just what they did," answered Elmer, "which would seem to go to prove that they told the truth when they said they were from Chattanooga. It is not many miles away from heah, right now. If we happened on a spur, where we would have an unhampered view, I believe you could pick out old Lookout Mountain, and also see the famous Missionary Ridge, where so much fighting went on long ago."

"Well, suppose we start to make ourselves comfortable before night sets in," remarked Rod, who knew how essential it was that they look after the many little matters connected with camping, before the daylight had entirely gone.

After they had been working as they saw fit for some time, Rod managed to get Elmer aside for a further little conference.

"I don't suppose now," he went on to say, to start the ball rolling, "that you've thought up anything about new about those men?"

"I've been bothering my head right along," answered the other, seriously; "and yet I don't seem able to place them. They looked at me as if they thought I was telling them what was not true, and that we had come down heah for some deeper purpose. Well, we have, but it isn't one that is unlawful. I reckon now I ought to have a right to make a hunt fo' those valuable papers belonging to my poor old grandfather, who is out of his head, and unable to tell us

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just where he hid the same some yeahs back."

"Of course you have, Elmer, and some way or other we're going to do that same job. The only trouble that I can see is how we might manage to get under the roof of the house that used to cover your head when you were a kid. Of course it's impossible that this Colonel Pepper could have the least suspicion that you meant to visit your old home, or could know anything about what would be apt to draw you down here?"

Elmer drew a long breath.

"I've been bothering my head with that same question fo' some time, Rod," he finally remarked; "and fo' the life of me I can't see however that could be. Up to a short time back you were the only one I shared my secret with, and even you didn't know the whole of it. Then how could wind of my mission ever get to the ears of Colonel Pepper? Fo' I can plainly see you are hinting now that those two horsemen may be friends of his."

"That was one of the things that slipped through my mind, I'll own up," said the other, frankly. "Of course I don't see how they could know anything about you, the hidden papers, or why you should come down here after all these years. But one thing I'm dead sure about."

"What is that, Rod?"

"Those men are not satisfied with the explanation you gave, to account for five fellows stopping for the night right here; when, by making some sort of a spurt, we could have reached the city. Even after they assured us the road was all right a little further on, and that we would have easy sailing, none of us seemed to act like we felt like making the try."

"Well, p'raps we may nevah run across the gents again, suh," Elmer went on to say, as though more urgent matters were crowding the subject out of his mind; "and right now I am thinking only of how we might manage to get inside that house. If I called on the Colonel, and asked him as a favor to let me sleep once more under the old roof I used to love right well as a boy, I wonder whether he'd accommodate me. And suh, would it be honorabe fo' me to accept such an invitation, and then betray that confidence?"

"I don't see how that need bother you, Elmer," replied Rod, who knew only too well how very touchy the Southern boy was on the subject of "honor," always the very first thing in his thoughts. "The papers do not belong to him, even if he did buy your old home. You are afraid some question of law might crop up, if you asked him to let you get them, though; and for that reason alone you are justified, in my mind, in taking the same without his knowledge. Think what it may mean for your folks up home a fortune going begging, that by every right in the wide world belongs to your grandfather, and no one else. Oh! forget all those squeamish notions, Elmer, and believe what I say."

The other drew a long breath, and then felt for Rod's hand, which he took hold of, and squeezed convulsively.

"I ought to have faith in all you say, Rod, my friend, and I will," he said, a little brokenly, it is true. "Just as you tell me, those papers belong to us, and no one else. The fact that they may be hidden on the property of this Colonel Pepper should make no difference. If he was a real gentleman I would not hesitate about going to him, and stating the case; but I feel positive, from what I remember of the man, that he would laugh at me, and seize the papers himself. Sooner than have that happen, I would forget that I was born south of the Dixie border, and take them, any way I could get the same."

"That sounds like your better self, Elmer; for I take it, one's first duty is to stand by his family, no matter what sort of notions he has about honor, and all that sort of thing. And I firmly believe that between us we'll manage somehow or other to learn the truth about those blessed papers. If they're there under the hearth-stone in the big

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living-room, by hook or by crook we'll carry them off; and without harming Colonel Pepper, or anybody else a particle."

"Thank you, Rod," said the Southern boy, with a catch in his voice that betrayed the deep emotion he was feeling; "I don't know what I would have done, but for you, and the rest of my chums. Taking all this long trip away down through this wild region, over poor roads, and without any fun about it, and all for friendship's sake. It's just fine, that's what I think."

"Oh! don't mention it, Elmer," remarked Rod, with a wave of his hand; "why, even our poorest rider, Rooster, was saying a little while back that he thought the magnificent scenery alone was worth all the work we'd had to put up with. And when he could make a remark like that, you can understand that none of us think it any hardship to be with you on this trip."

"It's getting evening now, and the sun's sunk out of sight," remarked Elmer, meditatively; "see, Josh is lighting his cooking-fire, and means to get supper started right away. I can hear the birds chattering away in the bushes, and how it all makes me think of the old days, when I used to listen to the same sounds, as the fire lighted up the western sky after sunset."

Rod left him there, still engaged in living over some of the far distant past, which had been brought vividly to his mind by the fact that he was once more in the same country of his boyhood days, with the old home not far removed.

Rooster and Hanky Panky were trying to render Josh more or less assistance in starting to get supper ready. They had only eaten a cold "snack" at noon, and hence all of them were looking forward with more or less eager anticipation to partaking of a warm meal.

The coffee-pot and the frying-pan were both doing good service, and the appetizing odors had already commenced to steal out upon the night air, when Rooster jumped to his feet, and stared around him, just as though he suspected some peril menaced them, that the surrounding gloom concealed from view.

"Did you hear it?" he asked hoarsely, gripping Josh by the shoulder, and causing that worthy to drop whatever he was holding, so as to get upon his knees, and raise his head, in order to listen.

CHAPTER XIX. WHAT COULD IT MEAN.

"LET go my arm, can't you, Rooster; what d'ye think I'm made of, anyhow rubber, or cement? You've gone and pinched me black and blue, chances are. What sort of an old noise d'ye mean? I didn't notice anything queer," and Josh managed to shake himself free from the tenacious grip of the excited chum.

But evidently Rooster was quite worked up over the matter, for he still remained in that crouching attitude; and from the way he cocked his head on one side, it was positive that he fully anticipated hearing the suspicious sound again.

Somehow his manner aroused Hanky Panky, Elmer, and even Rod, so that they were by this time all listening with bated breath, as though half expecting to hear some blood-curdling noise, or a cry for help well up out of the dismal woods near at hand.

"There!" gasped Rooster, suddenly.

Josh laughed disdainfully.

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"Wake up, Rooster!" he exclaimed in derision; "since when have you forgotten how a poor innocent little screech owl whimpers, when it's lost its mate. Take the cotton out of your ears, and pretty soon you'll hear a racket like the neighing of a horse. Then you'll *know* it's an owl!"

"Huh!"

That was all Rooster said, but it spoke volumes. He realized that Josh was right, though, for immediately afterwards the very sound the other had predicted came to their ears.

"It's an owl, all right," said Hanky Panky, wishing to show his superior knowledge over the chum who had mistaken that first whimper; "many's the time the rascals have kept me awake when I was visiting on a farm out in the country; and I've even gone out with a gun to chase 'em away; but it didn't work. I hardly crawled in between the sheets again before they were at it harder'n ever, just like they wanted to get the laugh on me. Forget it, Rooster; they don't bite."

"They don't, eh?" observed Josh; "well, you just try to take one in your hands after it's been hurt, and see what you get. Gee! I can feel the pinch he gave me right now, when I think of it; and that was two years ago."

The talk became general about that time, and Rooster's foolish alarm seemed for the time being forgotten.

But Rod eyed the other more than once in a reflective way, as though mentally figuring whether it would be the part of wisdom to allow so nervous a fellow to have any important part in the carrying out of their grand scheme. Rooster would no doubt have to tag along, since they could hardly leave him behind; but he must not be allowed to assume any position of prominence, where a fluke would mean disaster,

When supper was ready they gathered around to discuss it, and no one, looking at the five lads, and hearing their merry exchange of small talk, would for one moment imagine that there could be any serious business weighing on their minds.

Even Elmer seemed to have temporarily thrown off the incubus that had been haunting him of late, and laughed with the rest, when Hanky Panky related some droll incident of which he had been a witness.

But Rod, who liked to study character, and could read the signs fairly well, was quite sure that most of this apparent high spirits, at least on Elmer's part, must be assumed. He understood all the other had at stake, and how every minute now, up to the time when he could either prove the truth of his hopes, or see them go crumbling into the dust, must be fraught with eager anticipation and fears.

But it began to look as though the night would pass without any incident happening, calculated to once more arouse their curiosity; for some little time after they had finished their meal they lay around the glowing fire, and chatted on all sorts of subjects; though, as if by mutual consent, avoiding any mention of the one that of necessity must be uppermost in all their minds.

"Listen!" said Elmer, breaking into a little story Josh was telling, that had to do with some school-boy adventure, and an old enemy of the motorcycle boys, one Oscar Griffin, whose jealousy because of his being so often worsted by Rod Bradley, had frequently brought him into conflict with the latter's chums.

"Hey! quit that, now, Elmer; no silly old screech owl need apply when I'm telling a yarn that's goin' to make you sit up and take notice," complained Josh.

"But this wasn't an owl at all," replied Elmer.

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"What was it, then?" the other demanded, as though he had a right to know, since it was *his* story that had been halted.

"I thought I heard a hoss coming," Elmer went on; "though the sound of hoofs on the road has stopped now, perhaps because of a soft place he's struck. And while up around our Ohio home the coming of a hoss might not seem enough in itself to make a fellow stop a chum in the act of telling a story, down here you know it may be entirely different."

"Yes," said Hanky Panky, quickly, "a horse of another color, as they say."

"There it goes again, Elmer," observed Rod.

All of them could hear the sounds by now; even Rooster, who never pretended to have very keen hearing when it came to catching slight noises; but who could detect a screech owl's soft whimper, it had been recently proven.

"It's a horse, all right," admitted Josh.

"And not a saddle hoss, either, eh, Rod?" queried Elmer, glancing across toward the one he addressed, whose opinion they were all accustomed to accepting as pretty sure to be the actual facts, especially whenever it concerned anything that had to do with woods lore, or reading signs; for Rod had had experience which the others lacked, more or less.

"I think it is hitched in some sort of a vehicle with shafts," replied Rod, after listening carefully for half a minute to the sounds; "there's a difference in, first of all the gait at which a horse travels, you know; and then again, any one who has been among horses considerably learns to detect the truth by other signs. Yes, I should say that animal is drawing some light vehicle; he's coming along fairly fast, and if it were a heavy wagon we'd be apt to hear the wheels crunching on the road before this; which you notice isn't so."

Josh chuckled.

"Now, you all wonder what makes me feel funny," he went on to say; "and it's only this that we must be worked up to a pretty nervous stage when the mere passing of an unknown party, in perhaps a light wagon, or a buggy, can make us sit up this way, and look startled."

"But, suh," began Elmer, as though feeling that some explanation ought to be forthcoming from him; "we mustn't fo'get that we are surrounded by unusual conditions, when the very air seems to be charged with mystery. We are camping now, let me tell you, on Walnut Ridge; and you'll remember my saying that there are plenty of good people around this district who have always claimed that this same ridge has been haunted ground for years and years. I myself have known several, white people at that, who could not be induced to visit here after dark fo' any money. Besides, we must not fo'get that among these lonely mountain chains there are men living who make the moonshine stuff, and who because of the activity of revenue officers, are compelled to do pretty much all their business under cover of night."

"Yes, and there seem to be others abroad too, who may not be all they pretend to be," Rod hastened to add.

"Meaning the two gentlemen who claimed to be from Chattanooga, but who showed a queer sort of interest in our being down here; is that what you mean, Rod?" Josh asked.

"It is," answered the other; "and now the sound of wheels can be heard, you notice, showing that we were right. Given about two more minutes, and the vehicle will pass us by here."

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"Perhaps it might be well fo' me to be ready to ask the party a few questions, just as though we were strangers to the locality," suggested Elmer, "and fo' all we know, out of the answers we might pick up mo' or less information of value."

"I think that a splendid idea," said Hanky Panky, and even Rooster agreed that it was well worth trying.

So Elmer left the fire, and moved several paces along in the direction of the nearby road. Either by chance, or because of his customary caution, he stood where the shadows fell upon him; and in this way prevented his face from being seen.

The hoof-strokes came closer, and they could even hear the driver chirruping to his horse, as though the animal might have shown some disposition to shy because of glimpses of the camp-fire beside the road, which could be caught through the bushes that bordered the wood.

Now the vehicle could be seen advancing toward them. Every one of the boys had arisen, and with bent head watched the coming of the stranger. They knew that his curiosity must have been aroused also, for they could see that he was leaning forward, as though trying to make out who and what they were.

The fire-glow was strong just then, and must have lighted up their trappings especially the leather leggins which several of the boys had not yet discarded, though they would surely do so before trying to sleep.

Elmer, thinking that he detected no inclination of the other to make even a brief halt, started to address him.

"Would you have the kindness to stop fo' a few minutes, and give us some information, suh?" he called out, throwing up his arm to attract attention.

The man in the light rig uttered an exclamation, leaned still further forward as if to scrutinize the half-seen speaker more closely. Then he raised the whip he was gripping in one hand, and brought it down upon the back of his horse with quite a smart blow.

"G'lang, Bess!" he exclaimed.

The animal had already been showing signs of nervousness on account of the fire, and when the whip touched its sensitive skin it gave a sudden jump forward.

"Hold on, we " impatient Josh started to call out, but he cut his words short, because the vehicle was already dashing madly along the road, with the startled driver continuing to urge his horse on to renewed exertions.

Elmer returned to the fire, casting a rueful glance after the vehicle. And he found his chums exchanging mystified looks, as though for the life of them they could not understand what there was about their appearance to give a passing stranger such a decided shock.

And somehow they seemed of one accord to turn to the Southern lad for some reasonable explanation of the new mystery.

CHAPTER XX. MORE STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN.

"SAY, do my spots show as bad as that; and d'ye think, now, they take me for a smallpox patient at large?" demanded Hanky Panky, feeling with tender fingers of his cheeks, where some of the scratches he had received when slipping down into the deceptive hollow stump, could be seen.

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"Well, all I want to say is," remarked the puzzled Josh, "that there must be a mighty hang-dog look about this crowd, that makes everybody treat us like they were in mortal terror, and want to skip by without answering a civil hail. Now, Elmer asked a polite question that ought to have been met with a decent answer; yet you all saw how that fellow just clapped the whip to his nag and went hurrying on. Have we got a Jonah along, and if so who is he?"

He glared first at Hanky Panky, and then turned his eyes on Rooster. The former was up in arms at once.

"You need not look at me that way, Josh Whitcomb!" he exclaimed. "There never was a time when anybody used *my* picture to scare the baby with, and make it stop cryin'. Better try closer to home first, and see how the shoe fits. If you happened to have one of them scowls of yours on at the time, I don't wonder the feller thought he ought to get out of this as fast as his nag could take him; because you resembled a pirate then more'n anybody I ever ran across. Huh! people that live in glass houses hadn't ought to throw stones."

Rooster did not attempt to make any defense; but then he was such a meek fellow ordinarily, that the accusation just fell to the ground, because no one would ever flee at sight of his face.

"Elmer, you know something about this queer happening; s'pose you tell us what you think it means?" suggested Rod, who had been observing the Southern boy's face as he drew nearer to the fire.

"Well, suh, in the first place, let me tell you that I recognized that man," the other started to remark.

"You did?" echoed Josh; "and was it Colonel Pepper, Elmer?"

"It was not," came the reply. "His name is Ambrose Frazer, and when I used to live down this way, he was said to be one of the hardest cases around Chattanooga. I can remember that lots of people were afraid of him; and he would undoubtedly have landed in jail only fo' the political influence he seemed to have about that time."

"Ha! ha! that makes it funnier than ever!" chuckled Josh; "because, you all saw that Mr. Ambrose Frazer acted just like he was afraid of *us*. Now, whatever in all creation is there terrifying about five motorcycle boys, tell me? I'm all up in the air;" and he made a despairing motion with both hands, as he finished.

Elmer had been looking around. He now seemed to have made up his mind with regard to something, for he pointed to the leather leggins which several of his chums were wearing.

"I honestly believe, fellows," he observed, seriously, "that the explanation in this case lies just there, in the leggins you have on."

"Great governor! do you really mean that, Elmer? And Ambrose, he fancied from the fact that we seemed to have on some sort of uniform, we must be connected with the military?" and Josh again threw up both hands to express his surprise.

"That and nothing else," answered the other, firmly. "You understand that unless Ambrose has refo'med, which I think is out of the question, suh, he naturally can have no love for the authorities, whether soldiers, police officers, or revenue men. He may be connected with the moonshiners, and was carrying some cases of mountain dew in his light wagon right then. How do we know? That would cause him to feel sudden alarm, and make him want to whip up his horse to get away befo' we could examine his cargo."

"You may be right there, Elmer," Rod went on to say, thoughtfully; "and it would account for his actions, too. But somehow, it seems to me as though there might be some other explanation for the queer way this Ambrose skipped out, after taking that one look at us. There seems to be some sort of tremendous secret hanging over this

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whole region, and his fright may be only one little cog in the wheel. Perhaps we'll run across others, sooner or later, and even get a chance to try and solve the whole mystery."

They continued to talk in this sober strain for some little time. Somehow no one seemed desirous of resuming their former hilarious bantering spirit. Even Hanky Panky looked very serious, for a fellow who was usually given up to joking, and playing pranks. There was something in the very air around them that seemed to breathe of mystery. Rooster, who had a leaning that way, although not so much as Hanky Panky, every now and then looked around carefully, as though not meaning to be taken by surprise, should any ghostly visitor enter the camp.

And so strong had the feeling of insecurity grown that there was Hanky Panky, who as a rule took a drink of water every thirty minutes, when he could get it, actually denying that he was thirsty when Rod suggested that he take the tin pail and fill it at the spring that bubbled up just twenty paces away, so that Rod had to perform the little job himself.

But they had shaped their plans for the morning, and it now began to grow late, so that there was talk of getting some sleep, if the ghostly inhabitants of Walnut Ridge would permit such a thing.

Indeed, Rooster, who had been yawning at a terrific pace, was fixing his rough bed, with the idea of crawling in, when Josh, who was standing up stretching, declared that he could see moving lights somewhere back along the road.

"It looked like the twin lights of a car comin', boys," he added, when the others also jumped up to corroborate his discovery.

"You're right there, Josh, for a car it is, and comin' this way very fast," Hanky Panky announced. "Say, them fellers must know the road like a book, to skip the bad turns; or else they like to be jounced up and down, for the sake of their torpid livers. Will you make another try at stoppin' these parties, Elmer?"

"I might, if they give me half a chance," was the reply.

The car came on rapidly, so that soon they could hear it plainly.

"Bet you they don't pull up a bit!" declared Josh; but nobody seemed to care to dispute with him on that score; indeed, so many strange things were happening all the time that the boys schooled themselves to meet with anything singular.

And sure enough, while the car did slow up, as though to allow the two occupants a chance to look at those who were beside the fire, before Elmer could even open his mouth to address them, the driver was seen to give his engine full headway again; and before the staring eyes of the boys it rushed along the road, vanishing from their sight.

At that Josh fell over, as if quite prostrated.

"We're *It*, no use talkin'?" he declared, making some sort of mystical sign with his right hand, as though to fend off evil influences. "Hoodooed, blacklisted, marked off—color why, everybody shoots past us like we had the black plague. I'll never be real happy again till I find out what it all means. And that man at the wheel looked like he had good sense, too."

"Was that Colonel Pepper, Elmer?" asked Rod, suddenly.

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"I believe on my soul it was, suh," replied the Southern boy, on whose face deep lines could be seen, that seemed to tell of his being almost as mystified by the strange actions of these people as the rest of the boys. "You know, I haven't seen him fo' some yeahs, but I'm ready to say that was the man who lives in my old home. Of co'se he didn't recognize me; and it goes without saying, suh, that he couldn't mistake us fo' a bunch of moonshiners, or mountain outlaws, so his hurry must have come from some other cause. It may be that Colonel Pepper is engaged in some sort of business that would make him distrust the wearers of military leggins like those we carry. But no matter, to-morrow we'll be in a position to learn more; fo' we mean to try and induce the Colonel to accept us as his guests just fo' one night."

After that the boys soon quieted down. Rod and Elmer went into a committee of the whole, and talked in low tones for quite a while; but first of all Rooster, and then in turn Hanky Panky and Josh, rolled over upon the beds of leaves they had managed to get together, and were soon asleep. Trouble rests lightly on the minds of most boys, and none of these three were apt to lie awake brooding over things they could not help, and which did not materially concern them, except through a chum. They believed that it was all bound to come out right in the end; it always seemed to when Rod was at the helm.

Rooster was addicted to dreaming, and sometimes had the nightmare. More than once in the past he had aroused his chums by a sudden whoop, and a demand that they "take the dog away from him," or else "chase the bull off before he could get his horns entangled in his, Rooster's garments."

So after all, it was not strange that some time before morning Rooster, whose mind had become more or less inflamed, because of the queer things that had happened to them, and the many hints Elmer had let drop concerning the bad name given to Walnut Ridge by the country people, should indulge in one of his wild improbable dreams.

The others were aroused by a gasping cry, and saw Rooster sitting up, pointing his hand in front of him, and chattering at a fearful rate.

"It was trying to get me by the throat, I tell you!" he stoutly asserted; "and I had to fight like Sam Hill to dodge. Looky yonder, and tell me if that ain't a real genuine ghost, wavin' its hands at me? Don't let him grab me again, fellows, please don't! I'm all of a sweat, after fightin' so hard to keep him from squeezin' my windpipe!"

Then Josh jumped to his feet.

"Show me your old ghost, Rooster!" he exclaimed; "sure, you've only been dreamin', that's all. What! that white thing over there; why, those are only my extra pajamas I hung up to air before hitting the leaves for a snooze. That ain't a goin' to bite you, Rooster; I tell you I got 'em well trained, so that they eat out of my hand. Just lie down again, little boy, and believe that we'll watch over you. And when you have the nightmare again, don't, please don't take my poor old pajamas for the great Jabberwock that haunts Walnut Ridge."

And so Rooster, feeling that he had exhibited himself in no enviable light, after being aroused by that vivid and terrible dream, was content to let the matter drop and once more shut his eyes; but Josh had considerably first of all taken down the offending garment, the swaying of which in the uncertain light, and under the influence of the night breeze, had been the cause for the alarm.

CHAPTER XXI. THE BATTLEMENTS OF LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN.

"HOW about the time, Rod?"

Josh asked this question as they were pushing their motorcycles along a bad stretch of the road on the following

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morning.

"Just nine, lacking a Couple of minutes," replied the other, consulting the little cheap nickel watch he carried along with him nearly all the time.

"Hey! say we are taking things right easy nowadays, will you?" ejaculated Hanky Panky; "I've known the time when Rod here, was just bound to get us movin' when day was breakin'. Guess we must a struck them care-free Southern days we've heard so much about. It's sure in the air, then, down this way."

"No, not so much that, Hanky, as the fact that we only have a few miles to cover this morning, when we'll arrive at Elmer's old home; and you see, it wouldn't be just right to wake up Colonel Pepper, who was out late last night, and may want to put in a little extra time sleeping this fine morning."

"It came in pat for some other fellows besides Colonel Pepper, I want you to understand, boys," declared Rooster; who of late seemed to have gotten the better of his speech impediment, though the others feared that was too good a thing to last any great length of time.

"Well, a feller that dreams like you always do, Rooster, must lose a heap of sleep; and I don't wonder you want to lie abed mornings, when the rest of us are on the jump," Hanky Panky went on to remark, pointedly.

"Say, you'd every one of you been as silly as me last night, if you'd dreamed the same, and actually felt that awful *thing* choking you," the accused one hastened to say; "it was all in white too, and wavin' its hands at me every time I managed, with a terrible effort, to throw it off; and then, when I opened my eyes, to see that old object wavin' in the breeze, who wouldn't believe that it must be the ghost of his dreams?"

"I'd advise you not to eat any more cheese at supper, Rooster," remarked Rod.

"D'ye think that did it, Rod?" asked the other, almost piteously; "then hear me take a solemn vow, never again for me. Why, I was afraid my hair had turned snow-white in the night, because of the scare that dream threw into me; honest now I was, fellows. I ain't foolin' either."

"Well, see that little owl sitting there under the branches of that pine tree, Rooster; that's your friend of last night. And just remember, won't you, that all ghosts are sure to turn out to be either owls, pajamas whipping in the breeze, or something like that."

"Huh! it's easy to say that in broad daylight," grunted Hanky Panky; "but p'raps I could imagine a case where even the brave Josh Whitcomb would curl up, and hide his face from something that anyway looked like a spirit from the other world."

But reckless Josh only laughed jeeringly, as he cried over his shoulder:

"Bring on your ghosts whenever you want; I'd just like to meet up with one; you'd see me knock him silly right speedy, believe me, now!"

Hanky Panky and Rooster exchanged quick glances, and somehow, when Rod caught the nods they gave each other, he fancied that some fine day the boasting Josh might be accommodated, if those two plotters could manage to fix things.

"What are you looking for on the road, Rod?" asked Elmer, a minute later.

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"Oh! it just struck me that I ought to pay some attention to the marks made by that light vehicle that passed us last night, driven by Ambrose Frazer," was the immediate reply of the other.

"Then you've had no trouble about picking them out?" Elmer continued.

"Not any," answered Rod, "and if you'll just look here, I'll show you how I can tell. At our camp the light wagon made a curve, for the spirited horse shied at the blaze we had. So I knew which wheel marks they were, and also found that one of them was bound with some heavy wire, as though the steel tire had become loose, and needed the attention of a wheelwright. Here it is, you notice, and here, and here again."

"Sure as you're born," declared Josh, who had been listening to what was said, and now bent down to examine the wheel prints, where the road-bed consisted of heavy mud, owing to the shade of a big patch of trees that had prevented its drying out after the recent storm.

"And then I began to take notice of the track left by that car carrying Colonel Pepper and his friend," Rod went on to say. "There were a number of cars went along here since the rain, but his was the only one that passed *after* Ambrose whipped up his horse. Get the idea, boys?"

"I believe I do, suh, most certainly," Elmer hastened to admit; "that would show, beyond all doubt, that those prints were made by the Colonel's car."

"Well, here they cross the wagon tracks again," Rod observed, stopping as he made the remark, to point down at his feet; "and by looking closely you can find certain peculiar features connected with them, that would stamp the same on your memory. I firmly believe that if it ever became necessary for me to pick out the trail of that same car again I could do so."

"All of this is mighty interesting," remarked Hanky Panky; "even if the time never comes when you could make use of it. I like to hear you explain such things, Rod. And I hope I'm going to profit by it, somehow or other."

"Whee! when d'ye think we c'n mount our machines, and get a move on that'll count for somethin'?" Rooster wanted to know.

"I think I can see ahead where the road gets better," replied the other.

"Yes, and you know those two gents told us it would," observed Hanky Panky.

"And I'm agoin' to notice now, when we pass the next cabin that happens along, if the dogs howl at us, the chickens fly into the trees for shelter, and the kids start to cryin'," announced Josh; "because if they do, we're hoodoos for sure."

"Oh! you might expect something like that, because such a collection of motorcycle fellows never before came along this road, chances are," Rod went on to say; "but that doesn't explain, first the suspicion of those two sharp-looking gentlemen; second, the fright of old Ambrose Frazer, known to be a bad man in this section; and last but not least, the hurry shown by Colonel Pepper and his friend to cut past our camp in their car; for they had no horse to prance, and want to take the bitt in its mouth."

A short time later, and Rod's words turned out to be true, for the road did show decided signs of improvement, so that there was no longer any necessity for them to go afoot, and trundle their weighty machines along.

"And don't I hope that it'll be some time before we have to do that push act again," Rooster sighed, as he got himself ready to straddle his wheel, and make a delightful start.

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Elmer had not said a word all this while, and Rod knew just why. The Tennessee boy was now amidst familiar scenes, that doubtless aroused memories that had long lain dormant. He must have led a fairly happy life down here during his earlier boyhood days, and old recollections were beginning to crowd in upon him, so that he found no time for ordinary conversation.

Then again, it was only natural that he should be laboring under considerable of a strain, in connection with the strange mission that had drawn him back here, after several years' absence. The one question was ever before his mind would he really find the precious papers which had been long lost, and the absence of which made so great a difference in the happiness and welfare of the Overton family; or was he fated to meet with a great disappointment?

After they were all mounted, and moving swiftly along the road, headed almost in a direct south line, many were the exclamations of satisfaction. Why, it almost seemed as though they had passed through days since last they were given a chance to make a proper use of their motorcycles.

Elmer still led, and once he made gestures with his arm as though trying to call their attention to something away off in the distance. Upon casting a glance in that quarter Rod found that he could catch a glimpse of some high point or peak, with a frowning front; which he more than suspected must be the battlements off the famous Lookout Mountain, where Hooker had engaged in his Battle above the Clouds, in those old tempestuous days when this whole region rocked under the tread of armed hosts, as the North and South met in fierce strife, now but a sad memory.

Possibly, later on, if so be their odd mission turned out well, the motorcycle boys might think it proper, while down in this celebrated region where history was made so fast in those stirring days, to visit the bustling city at the foot of Lookout Mountain; and also take in the battlefields near by, as well as walk through the National Cemetery where the dead soldiers have been laid away by thousands.

But Rod immediately dismissed all this from his mind just then. Until his close chum had settled his business, one way or another, none of them would think of such a thing as pleasure. They had promised to back Elmer up in his quest, and did not mean to allow anything to come between.

What was the use of having a lot of chums if they could not make themselves useful in time of need? Warm-hearted and impulsive Elmer would exert himself to the limit, should any one of them require assistance, and he be in a position to render first aid to the injured. And so Rod only voiced the full intentions of the other three boys when he was saying all this to himself, while riding along in the wake of the pace-maker.

So a short space of time went on. At any moment now Rod expected that Elmer would announce the fact that he had sighted his old home, for they must be drawing very close to the same. When he himself caught fugitive glimpses of what appeared to be a very substantial building, set among a splendid bunch of trees, he suspected that this might prove to be the place.

Hence Rod was not at all surprised when he saw Elmer throw up his hand, and in this way give the signal that he meant to stop. A couple of minutes later, the other trio of motorcycle boys had arrived also, and the entire five were bunched together.

It was then that Elmer pointed toward the place Rod had already picked out, and in tones that vibrated from intense feeling, if nothing more, despite his efforts to conceal the fact that he was shaken by the sight, announced:

"Over yondah, fellows, you will see my old Southern home. Around here I spent the happiest days of my life; and now I feel ashamed to think that necessity compels me to enter that same house with a lie on my lips; but I've considered it all well, and there's going to be no drawing back now. I must know the truth about those papers,

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come what will, and believe me, suh, I'm still full of hope, and faith."

CHAPTER XXII. MAKING PROGRESS.

THE motorcycle boys had now arrived at a very important crisis in their undertaking down in the wilds of Tennessee. There before them they could see the former home of their team-mate, Elmer Overton, which was the objective point of the long ride from their Ohio home town. And possibly before the sun had sunk for the second time, the anxious chum would have found the opportunity he craved, whereby he might learn whether there was anything in those words spoken by his poor old grandfather, now out of his mind, in his sleep, and which had seemed to refer to some hiding-place under a heavy stone.

They had from time to time threshed the subject so well that there was now little more that could be said concerning what they meant to do.

And as Elmer, after relieving his feelings in the manner stated at the close of the preceding chapter, lapsed into silence, none of the others chose to break into his reflections by asking questions.

"If the rest of you are ready, we might run along now, right up to the gate that leads into the old place," Elmer finally observed, suddenly coming out of his little spell of melancholy thought connected with the dim past.

"Sure we are, Elmer," declared Josh, only too eager to be moving again.

The road was so good at this place that they could actually ride two abreast, especially when going along at a moderate pace. Possibly their machines gave out more or less warning sounds, such as might attract the attention of persons unused to such things; for passing a small house by the roadside they saw a bunch of piccaninnies filling the doorway, gazing in awe at the, to them, never before witnessed spectacle of five boys riding bicycles that did not need to have the pedals worked, in order to progress uphill or down, and which kept up a continual spluttering rattle as they sped past.

"There's some one on the porch, Rod!" said Elmer, who had his jaws set firmly, as though determined not to spoil all his plans through any exhibition of weakness.

"Yes, and more than one person: but here, where we turn in, I'm noticing something that interests me a heap, let me tell you, Elmer," replied the other.

"As what?" asked the Southern lad, who had slowed down, so that they were now advancing at a snail's pace, seemingly.

"Why, both the motorcar, and that light wagon, turned in here," replied Rod. "If that was Colonel Pepper in the auto, as you thought, why of course it would be only what we'd expect for him to come home; but don't you see that it looks queer for that Ambrose, the fellow you told us had been a tough character years ago, and probably is yet, to have come *here*, right after sighting us; just like he wanted to let his friend, the colonel, know about us?"

"But I'm dead sure, Rod, the man never could have recognized me, suh, not fo' a minute," Elmer hastened to remark. "I remember that I stood pretty much in the dark; and besides, I'm certain Ambrose Frazer wouldn't know me if he met me face to face. I've changed a heap since leaving here, you must remember, Rod."

"But I wasn't thinking of that, Elmer," said the other, in a low tone, for they were now close to the big gate, and the house, although set back some little distance, was at the same time not so far removed but that a keen pair of ears might catch words uttered too loud. "I meant that perhaps this former bad man and Colonel Pepper might

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have a secret in common; and that Ambrose Frazer, seeing us, and mistaking us for soldiers of the Government, hurried here to put his partner on his guard. That's all I dare say now."

But Elmer shot one quick look of inquiry toward his wideawake chum that told as plainly as words could have done how Rod, in those few words, had given him something to ponder over, and which in due time might bear fruit.

The gate was closed, and accordingly the two motorcycle boys jumped to the ground on arriving in front of it. As Elmer started to undo the familiar fastenings Rod kept his eyes fixed on the porch, where a couple of figures could be seen.

One that he felt sure must be the new owner of the Overton home, stood there, with a hand resting on the rail, and watching their movements closely. Rod fancied that there was a deal of curiosity and anxiety in the manner of the colonel, although he was trying to conceal his feelings.

And as, having opened the gate, the two boys started to wheel their machines up the walk toward the steps, followed in turn by the other three tourists, evidently the man on the stoop was more than ever bewildered when he discovered that these mysterious strangers were, after all, not soldiers, as he might at first have believed, but mere boys, decked out in the leather jackets, leggins, and caps which seem best suited to the swift mile-a-minute pace often pursued by those who follow the road on motorcycles; while each sported a pair of goggles above the peak of his head gear, to be used to keep the wind and dust from affecting his sight when making speedy time.

Elmer stopped just for the fraction of a minute necessary to drop the stand of his machine, and thus hold it erect; which action Rod copied post haste, as he did not wish to miss a single thing that was about to transpire. Then the pair of them walked straight to the steps, and up the same.

There were two men on the porch, as Rod had declared, and just then both of them stood close together, awaiting the coming of the strangers.

From what Elmer had told him, Rod had no trouble at all in picking out the one who must of necessity be Colonel Pepper, and the present owner of the estate which had been his chum's boyhood home.

He was a big, coarse man, with eyes that Rod saw were shifty, although just then they were fixed on his two callers steadily enough; while a frown made a crease directly across his red forehead, and what seemed to be an uneasy look marked his whole pig-like face.

Elmer had made all his plans, and doubtless practiced just how he should address this man, over and over again in his waking hours during the nights they had been on the journey.

He stepped straight up, and looking him squarely in the face, said:

"I reckon, suh, you don't recognize me, and yet I have a great favor to ask of you, Colonel Pepper, which I hope very much you will see fit to grant. My name, suh, is Overton, Elmer Overton, and I was brought up as a boy on this same place that is now your home."

Rod, watching closely, was sure he saw a great wave of feeling, that for all he knew might stand for intense relief, sweep across the red face of the heavy-set man upon thus learning the truth. Why, he even allowed a smile to appear on his face, and considerably to Elmer's satisfaction he thrust out a pudgy hand, which, however, upon being taken, proved to be as cold as that of a dead person, or so lacking in warmth of feeling that Elmer was reminded of touching a snake or a toad.

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"Oh! now I see what it was looked kind of familiar about you," said Colonel Pepper, in a heavy, scratchy sort of voice; "so you're the boy I remember belonged here before I bought the place. Elmer, you said your name was well, Elmer, to what am I indebted for this kind visit?"

"First, suh, let me make you acquainted with my chum, Roderic Bradley, who comes from the same town where my people now reside in Ohio, Garland. And while I am about it, Colonel Pepper, I hope you will allow me to also make you acquainted with these other friends of mine."

He mentioned their names as they now came forward, and the colonel, apparently now partly amused as well as curious, made it a point to offer his flabby hand to each one in turn; though Josh was plainly seen to shudder when he took hold of the same.

"I think I saw your party camping up the road last night, son," the owner of the estate went on to say. "I was coming back home with my lawyer, here, Mr. Silas Goober, and we were in a great hurry to arrive, having been detained longer than I had expected, which prevented us from stopping in order to find out just who you all were, and what brought you down into Tennessee wilds; for we supposed that you must be from above Mason and Dixon's line."

Rod could give a shrewd guess that this last was said in order to excuse the haste shown by the two men in the car as it whizzed past the camp-fire, as though the presence of seeing United States soldiers had given the colonel and his companion more or less cause for alarm.

He had merely glanced at this second man, and when he was thus introduced to them by the colonel as his lawyer, Rod gave him a second look. Well, the man might be a legal representative, for there are many lawyers who bear the stamp of knave and cheat upon their faces; but somehow Rod was secretly of the opinion that this same Silas Goober, if that was his true name, might have some other profitable connection with Colonel Pepper beyond being his *legal* adviser.

"And now, suh, you will remember my saying," pursued Elmer, carrying his pre-arranged plan along another space, "that I had a great favor to ask of you, and one I do hope you will find it in your heart to grant me."

"Spit it out, son," the doughty colonel ventured; "and after I've heard it, if I can accommodate you, I guess I'll have to do it. What do you want of me?"

"Only this, suh," said Elmer, drawing a long breath. "I was brought up under this roof, and I shall never cease to love it, as any boy would his old home. Finding myself in the neighborhood, I suggested to my friends that we drop in to meet you, suh, and see if you would allow me to spend just one night here as your guest. I assure you, Colonel Pepper, I would esteem it an exceedingly great favor."

All eyes were focused on the red face of Pepper. He seemed to be puzzled some at first, and looked suspiciously at Elmer, as though wondering whether there could possibly be anything back of this modest request, which seemed so reasonable. Then, as though reassured by the demeanor of the boy, he appeared to sweep these thoughts aside. An expression as of relief followed his anxiety; why, the colonel even allowed his flabby countenance to expand into a broad smile, as he heartily observed, in a way that thrilled all the motorcycle boys:

"Oh! that's it, eh? You want to stop over one night with me, so as to tell your folks up there that you slept under the old roof-tree again, eh? Well, now, I kind of guess we can arrange all that, Elmer; yes, and your chums in the bargain. I ain't a Southerner, but that don't seem to be any reason why I can't be just as generous as your class o' folks down here. Stay a night with me why, to be sure; and I'd want you to make yourself right at home, and look over the old place all you feel like doing. Ain't that right, Lawyer Goober?" and turning quickly on the other man, whose face had seemed to cloud up, as with uneasiness, the colonel gave him a plain wink, which Rod

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interpreted to mean: "now, don't you go to worrying about this; I'll fix things so they won't bother us one bit; and there's nothing that will dispel suspicion so much as appearing to be hospitable, you know, so agree with me and look pleasant."

CHAPTER XXIII. AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

"I TELL you, Rod, suh, it's exceedingly hard fo' me to realize that I'm really and truly heah. I rub my eyes, and then look around again, as if I expected to wake up; only to see the things I've been dreamin' about these long yeahs. Many a time did I used to lie under these same glorious trees, and look up yondah at that bold peak, with the clouds sweeping along past the same, dreamin' suh, of the time when possibly I might sail the wide seas like old Robinson Crusoe, and see the world."

Elmer said this to his chum, Rod, as the two of them lay at full length on the soft ground, about half a mile away from the house.

It was the middle of the afternoon of the day marking their arrival at the home of Colonel Pepper. All of the motorcycle boys had taken lunch with the owner of the place, and the lawyer, Silas Goober, had formed one of the party.

During the meal the conversation had, of course, centered mostly about the trip of the boys through Kentucky and Tennessee. One, and then another of them, had related interesting incidents that seemed to hold the attention of the two men.

If Colonel Pepper had allowed any sort of suspicion to take hold of him in the beginning, concerning the real mission of these daring motorcycle riders, apparently it was now pretty thoroughly laid at rest; for he seemed at his ease, and laughed quite heartily when any humorous account came along, concerning the adventurous journey over the roads leading into Dixie.

Rod imagined that the more crafty so-called "lawyer" was not quite as well satisfied. He often eyed one of the boys closely, as though trying his level best to read what might lie under the surface, perhaps suspecting that everything might not be just what appearances indicated.

And judging from this, Rod was pretty sure that if any break came in the plans he and Elmer had arranged, for carrying out the little mission which had really brought them into the wilds of Tennessee, it was apt to be the fault of this same wily Silas Goober, whom he did not believe to be any more a lawyer than he might be a preacher.

Later on the boys had scattered somewhat. Rooster and Hanky Panky had suddenly developed a sleepy stage. Possibly they had gorged at the lunch table, having been deprived of certain luxuries for some time now, and partaken too freely of the same. At any rate, they declared they meant to drop down on the comfortable single beds in the rooms assigned to them, and make up for lost time. Those who wanted to wander around in the hot sunshine, and wear themselves out, why, they were entirely welcome to a monopoly of the exercise.

Josh, too, had something he wanted to do in connection with his engine, which had not been working as satisfactorily as he would have liked, of late. Josh, as we happen to know, was an impatient sort of fellow, and ready to get provoked at the least thing. Rod really believed that he potted with the working parts of his roadster a little too much, and that was why he continued to have "engine trouble," when several of the others never had the least complaint to make, believing in letting well enough alone.

That left Rod and Elmer to do all the wandering. Of course it was only natural that the lad who had spent his boyhood days around that section should be wide-awake to the opportunity to renew his acquaintance with many

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points of intense interest, to him. And while Rod thought it his bounden duty to keep his chum company, at the same time he also felt more or less curiosity in the matter; for often had he heard Elmer mention certain facts that had a bearing on the woods; the waters of the Tennessee river above Moccasin Bend; and many other features connected with those old days.

They had wandered afar, though not getting more than a mile away from the house at any time; and feeling warm and somewhat tired, had thrown themselves down here to rest, and continued their talk.

"It's now about three o'clock," Rod mentioned, after his friend had finished his little say; "and we'll aim to get back to the house inside another hour. Then will come another trying time, when we all sit down at the table with this strange Colonel Pepper again, and talk back and forth. I was a little afraid one of the boys might mention something that he hadn't ought to, and in that way make those men suspect us again; but I must say they all did nobly told lots of humorous stories of our troubles on the road, and the queer things we met up with, but not a hint that we'd come down here on purpose to spend just one eventful night under your old roof, so as to let you look for that bunch of valuable securities that you believe lies under the stone in that big living-room."

"I can never tell you, Rod, what a sensation I had, when I first entered that same room, and knew that I was even then stepping on the very hearthstone under which I fancied a fortune was lying right then, that belonged to my family, though just now located on the property of another. But I saw him looking at me sharply; and I reckon, suh, I managed to recover myself in time."

"You certainly did yourself proud, Elmer," declared Rod, enthusiastically; "and I'm sure that he must have laid any feeling you displayed to the fact that you still had a love for your old home hidden deep down in your heart, which was once more fighting to show itself."

"Thank you, Chum Rod," said the Southern boy, softly; "and he would be right in believing that way, suh. But what about his lawyer friend, Mistah Goober?"

"I can tell from the curl of your lip when you pronounce his name, Elmer, that you think a good deal as I do about that man," Rod went on quickly to say.

"I like him even less than I do Colonel Pepper, and that's a fact, suh!" declared Elmer, with a shiver. "There is something about the man that makes me think of a tricky, treacherous snake. He is always rubbing his hands together, as if they were cold; and I am sure from the way he watches us that he believes we are up to some game or other. If Colonel Pepper has a hidden secret, which both of us seem to believe is the case, then this Mistah Goober is as deep in the mud as the colonel is in the mire; and he fears that we may stumble on the same, while being entertained heah. But it gets me, to know why Colonel Pepper ever asked us all to be his guests over night."

"I think I can give a guess there," Rod asserted, confidently.

"Then I wish you would, because it sure puzzles me more than I can tell," his chum went on to declare.

"In the first place, he was greatly worried when we came in on him;" and Rod went on laying down his points just as though he might be a lawyer, bent on convincing the jury for a client; "he had seen us in camp, and hurried past, to get home, and perhaps hide certain things he didn't want seen. Then came our friend in the wagon, Ambrose Frazer, with another report that added to the general alarm. And when finally he saw the bunch of unknown persons, whom he more than half believed to be connected with the Government forces, actually stop in front of his place, deliberately open the gate, and head straight for the spot where he was standing, it must have given the colonel a cold chill."

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"I seem to agree with you as far as you have gone, suh," Elmer admitted; "and can well understand how he must have felt until he made the discovery that after all we were only boys. Yessiree, I could see the flash of relief that shot across both their faces."

"Well, we happened to strike while the iron was hot, that's all," continued Rod logically. "You made your request just after he was feeling so relieved that he couldn't help granting it. Besides, perhaps he had a curiosity to learn more about what had brought you down here near your old home. And then again, if he entertained a party of respectable fellows over-night, it might go far toward shunting suspicion on to a side track; if so be he is engaged in any sort of shady business, as both of us seem to think."

Elmer chuckled, as though pleased.

"I give you my word, Rod," he observed, "that when it comes to lining up convincing arguments, you have few equals. I would stake my reputation on your some day being a great and famous lawyer. Because, suh, that is exactly what must have passed through the mind of this same Colonel Pepper at the time he invited me to stay ovah with him, and all my friends in the bargain. It would cost him nothing, and he might find some profitable way of turning the affair to account."

"Then it's settled that to-night we must find some chance to make our little investigation?" Rod went on to say.

"We must, or the chance may nevah come again," added Elmer, with an anxious look in the direction of the distant house, which could just be seen from where the two chums sat.

"I only hope, then, that Colonel Pepper and his lawyer friend will sleep as sound as two tops to-night," Rod ventured to say; "because, you know, it would be pretty rough on you to have them drop in on us, just after we had managed to lift the hearth-stone, and perhaps discovered those precious papers there. For if I read the ugly temper of the colonel right, and I think I can, he'd claim everything in sight, and never listen to what you had to say."

"And let me tell you right now, suh, I'll be a happy boy when it's all ovah with, and we're on our way back home, with, I hope, those same documents safely pinned fast in my inside pocket," Elmer admitted.

"One thing I noticed as we came across the drive in leaving there," said Rod, "and that is, Colonel Pepper seems to have plenty of people visit him, for there were marks of many wheels in the gravel. Of course, that might come in any ordinary line of business, but thinking what we do about him, it looks suspicious. But tell me, Elmer, what's happened to strike you as queer; you seem to be looking steadily up there in the direction of that little knob, as though you thought you'd discovered something out of the way."

"And so I have, Rod," the other returned, in a low but excited tone; "but don't jump up, or make any sort of sudden move that would draw attention to us here. I thought I caught sight of something moving up there, suh. And now, there it is again, so you can see fo' yourself. There are two of them, Rod, two men lying there, and believe me, I think we have seen them both befo' now!"

"You're right, Elmer, and there's no mistake about it," replied the other boy, as he in turn stared aloft toward the point that formed a little eyrie of observation, from which the surrounding rough country could be scanned; "those are the same two mysterious men who stopped at our road-side camp, and chatted with us; also exchanged signals, as though they thought we might be more than we seemed."

"And do you notice what they are doing, Rod?" shrilled the Southern boy, though his voice was lowered to a whisper.

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"Sure I do," replied Rod; "they've got a field-glass, and seem to be watching the house and grounds belonging to your illustrious successor, Colonel Pepper!"

CHAPTER XXIV. ELMER'S FAITH IN ROD.

"WHAT do you make of it, Rod?" asked the Southern boy, presently, after they had watched the strange actions of the two men for some little time.

"It gives me a new idea," was the immediate reply of the other lad.

"I take it you mean that, after seeing this same thing, you have changed your mind in regard to those same two men; am I right there, Rod?"

"Yes, that's about the gist of it, Elmer. You see, I had about made up my mind they must be in touch with the colonel himself; but now we know there isn't anything in that idea. You can see plain enough that they're spying on his place. And Elmer, that makes me think they may be revenue men of some kind."

The Southern boy puckered up his lips, and gave vent to a low whistle, to indicate his astonishment.

"Whoever would have dreamed it?" he muttered; "just to think of a man like Colonel Pepper being connected with moonshiners. Why, it's hard to believe, I tell you, Rod. So far as I've ever known, the men who break the law by making or handling this mountain dew have always been poor, ignorant mountaineers, and never men of influence in the country, who could live in houses like my old home. Scratch the back of a moonshiner, suh, and you would find a po' white, who lived in a tumble-down old shack or cabin, and never had ten dollahs to his name."

"I believe you, Elmer," said Rod, quietly, "and that makes it all the more strange to me. But whatever is going on around here, take it from me that your Colonel Pepper is up to some sort of game that the United States authorities don't fancy much; and they are watching him right along."

"But what ought we do about it?" asked Elmer, doubtfully; and Rod immediately realized that his exaggerated sense of honor was beginning to sway him; because it chanced that for the moment they were the guests of the colonel, Elmer might be figuring that they were in duty bound to warn him that he was in danger.

Rod knew enough to nip that game in the head at once. He felt that they were not indebted in the least to Colonel Pepper, simply because the other had accommodated them over-night, for some reason of his own. And besides, if what Rod began to suspect turned out to be true, they could not afford to antagonize the forces of the Government, if so be these two men represented that authority.

"Nothing," he hastened to say, "that is, if you mean about letting him know. In the first place, it's really none of our business. Then again, if we cut in and meddled, we might be looked on as accessories to the fact, and get ourselves in a peck of trouble. If the colonel is doing anything he hadn't ought to, he must take his medicine, that's all, Elmer."

"I reckon you know best, Rod, and I shall do whatever you advise, suh," the other went on to say, for he had the utmost confidence in the sagacity of his chum.

"We must lie low here until they go away, and then we can slip off," Rod continued. "So far as I can see, they don't know that we're here under these trees, and we'd better not give the game away. But they take turns in looking, and you notice, Elmer, that it's always in the direction of your old home."

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"Yes, and it strikes me hard to think that the new owner has gone and brought some sort of shame on that house," Elmer almost groaned; which way of expressing himself told the other what a great affection the Tennessee boy still entertained for the old place.

They continued to lie there at their ease, and watch operations. This lasted, it might be, for another half hour; after which the two men seemed to have become satisfied with their survey, for they disappeared.

"I think we'd be safe now in getting away," said Rod, after some little time had elapsed, and they saw nothing more of the spies. "But we must be careful how we act, for we might chance to come across those parties; and you know they seemed to look on us with more or less suspicion before, as if they thought we might be doing business with Colonel Pepper, whatever it is he's up to."

"Yes," added Elmer, quickly, and with a slight smile at the thought; "and when they learned that we were guests of his, as they must have done befo' this time, I reckon now, suh, those same gentlemen made up their minds we were as deep in the mud as he is in the mire. If we happen to meet up with them, don't you think, Rod, it would be the right thing fo' us to disabuse their minds right speedily. I somehow don't much fancy being taken fo' a moonshiner, or a criminal either, whichever the colonel proves to be."

"Leave that to me, Elmer, if we do run across those men; I've got a scheme in my mind that ought to fill the bill. But perhaps, after all, we may get away from here before the storm breaks; and then you know it won't matter a cent to us what happens to your successor."

"I hope you turn out to be a prophet, Rod, sure I do," declared the other, with more earnestness than, according to Rod, the matter seemed to warrant; "and that we will be able to finish my little errand this very night. Oh! how I hope that nothing will stop me from learning the truth. And it seems as if my whole heart and soul might be wrapped up in lifting that hearth-stone, and seeing what lies underneath the same. You don't know how I feel about it, Rod."

"Yes, I do, and I'm hoping about as much as you can that it turns out just as you want it to. But Elmer, as I said before, you must keep a check on your feelings. Get a grip on yourself, and be ready to meet disappointment steadily, if after all there turns out to be nothing there."

"I'm trying to steel myself that way, Rod; but all the while it seems as though there was a sweet little bird whispering new hopes in my ear, just like I used to hear the mocking-bird trill in the tree under my window at peep of dawn. But even if the worst does come, I needn't be afraid, as long as I have such good chums to back me up. Don't you worry about me, suh; I'll be all right."

They were walking away, now, and had already placed considerable distance between themselves and the spot from whence they had watched the strange actions of those two mysterious men.

Suddenly a tall, lanky figure arose out of some bushes just to one side of the boys. Rod immediately recognized the man as the raw-boned moonshiner, Si Keck. He was of course a little surprised to see him under such conditions; but while the man gripped his rifle in his hand, he made no hostile demonstration. Besides, what cause had they to fear Si Keck, when he was indebted so much to the motorcycle boys?

"Yuh don't need tuh be worried at seein' me hyah, boys," remarked the other, as a faint smile crept over his weather-beaten and wrinkled face. "I ben awatchin' o' yuh ever sense yuh done me thet good turn, an' I'm agwine tuh say agin that ef ever yuh need help, jest give ther sign I done told yuh about, an' Si Keck'll break a leg arunnin' tuh back yuh up. I seen yuh awatchin' them strangers on ther knob, an' I reckoned as how yuh wondered what was agoin' on. I'm some flabbergasted myself, atyin' tuh figger hit all out; 'case ther kunnel, he ain't never be'n mixed up in any moonshine still bizness, an' if so be them fellers *air* revenues, they must be on ther track uh bigger game

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than weuns."

"Well," said Rod, pleasantly, "it was mighty fine in you following us all the way here, just to see that we didn't get into any harm through your mountain friends, and we appreciate it, Si Keck. We've got something to do this very night, and my friend Elmer, here, has told you about it, I understand. Perhaps, if we happened to be discovered while making that little search, we might find ourselves in hot water; and in that case, Si, it would come in very handy for us if we could just give the whistle that would bring assistance. While the papers, if there are any hidden there, positively belong to my chum's grandfather, Mr. Overton, at the same time this fiery Colonel Pepper would make a great howl at our trying to get away with them from under his nose. You understand all that, don't you, Si?"

"Reckons as how I does, suh," replied the tall mountaineer, nodding his head, while his beady eyes twinkled, as though with amusement, or pleasure over the possibility of meeting up with stirring action such as he loved; "an' ef so be I hears sech a thing as a whistle like I done tole yuh tuh give, w'y, me'n a cupple uh pals, we'll be thar in a jiffy, suh. I jes' thought as how I'd let yuh know I war 'round these hyah diggins', so's yuh cud 'spect anythin' to happen. Thet's all."

He waved his bony hand, and stalked away, vanishing a minute later in the thick undergrowth.

The two boys looked at each other, and then smiled broadly. "Moves along just for all the world like a play," declared Rod. "But all the same, it is real comforting to know that we've got a trusty friend close at hand, to call on, in case we get in a tight place."

"Yes," Elmer went on to remark, confidently, "and you can be certain, suh, that Si Keck will be hovering mighty close around that house this comin' night, ready to break in with a rush. We'd better be careful how we happen to whistle, because I reckon now that he'll be that anxious, he may take the first sound for the signal, and break in on us befo' we want him."

They continued their walk, and finally turned their steps toward the house. Elmer was satisfied with the way things were progressing. He had laid out all his plans for action, and unless some hitch, which they could not foresee, came along to disarrange things, he confidently believed they would be able to carry these through to a successful termination.

"Hello! what's this mean, d'ye suppose?" Rod exclaimed, as they drew near the place that had formerly been the Overton homestead, until the disaster that came upon the old man had caused the family to go north.

Their three chums were standing near the gate, and seemed to be awaiting their coming with considerable impatience. Indeed, there was Josh waving them to hurry; and it really looked as though something of considerable importance might have taken place since Rod and Elmer sauntered away two hours or so previously.

Of course they quickened their pace at this, and asked each other what could have possibly happened; but it was useless to try and guess, when the solution to the mystery was so near at hand.

And so they came up to the spot where the other three were standing, with Hanky Panky giving a quick glance around every minute or so, as though he wished to make positive that no intruder were near enough to overhear what they said, or even observe their suspicious actions.

When Rod saw all this, and the grave looks on the usually merry faces of the other three chums, he somehow realized that something very unusual must indeed have taken place since he and Elmer strolled off. And hence he prepared to ask questions so as to get a quick grasp upon the situation.

CHAPTER XXV. THE TELL-TALE COINS.

"TELL him, Josh, what you was agivin' us; and if it don't make Rod sit up and take notice, I miss my guess," Hanky Panky started in to say, nudging the other chum as he spoke.

"So, it's Josh who's made some sort of discovery, is it?" asked Rod; "when we left on our walk he was head over ears in fixing his engine. Has any meddler been bothering with our machines; is that it, Josh?"

The other made a gesture of disdain.

"Not much," he observed, as though that in itself would have been a mere trifle in comparison with the momentous news he had to communicate; "somethin' bigger'n cripplin' our motorcycles, believe me, Rod."

"Well, get busy then, and tell us; this is no time to draw a story out just for the sake of making the rest of us show that we can be impatient as well as you generally are. Go ahead, Josh!" urged Rod.

"Well, it's this way," began the other, thus appealed to; "I'd just finished tellin' Hanky and Rooster here, when we sighted you two acomin'. But then, believe me, it'll bear repeatin'. You see, I got all through fixin' my engine, and not wantin' to go indoors and bother wakin' up the sleepers," with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of Rooster and Hanky Panky, "why, I just thought I'd take a stroll around the grounds, which looked kind of cool an' invitin'.

"I happened to be over among the trees not far away from that right wing of the house, when I noticed that a wagon had come in from the road. Now, I didn't mean to be nose-y, I give you my word, Rod; and sitting there I was watchin' idly, when I saw the colonel come hurryin' out of the house, and say somethin' in an excited way to the driver, that made him jerk the lines, and stir his horse to movin' again.

"He came right along toward me, and then turned in close to that wing of the house. I begun to get a little curious by that time, and watched what was agoin' on. And say, the more I saw of his actions the more I felt that he was hurryin' things for fear somebody'd glimpse him; because, you see he'd step back, and look all 'round first, and then go to the old wagon, lift somethin' up, and carry the same down into the cellar under that wing of the house.

"Course 'twas none of my business if the colonel chose to keep his supplies in such a queer place; but all the same, knowing what I did, I just couldn't help thinking I'd give somethin' to peek into one of them same packages, and see what sort of stuff they contained. And believe me, they seemed some heavy, too, because that man when he shouldered the same, just staggered along."

"And," broke in Hanky Panky, when Josh paused for breath, "he said as how he was even a thinkin' of sneakin' up and takin' a look one time, when the feller who drove the wagon was down below; but his nerve failed him."

"Aw! what makes you say that, Hanky?" exclaimed Josh, indignantly; "it wasn't so much a question of nerve, as that I thought what a fool I'll feel like if that old fierce lookin' colonel happened to come along just then, and caught me snoopin' in his private business. Yes, and I was thinkin' of Elmer here, too, and how it might play hob with his little game if I got nabbed. Nobody that I know of ain't never accused *me* of being afraid. I guess, now, it's generally the other way; and I'm more apt to break up a game by bein' in too big a hurry."

"Right you are, Josh," said Elmer, laying a hand on the arm of the speaker; "and it was mighty nice of you to think of me at such a time. I can understand, suh, the temptation you had to fight against, and believe me, I surely appreciate it."

"Yes, and when you resisted that inclination to take a peep, Josh," remarked Rod, warmly, "you were winning a

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splendid victory, even though it might seem a very little thing in the eyes of Rooster or Hanky Panky here. But go on, and tell us more, because you've got both of us worked up to near fever-pitch already."

"So I just kept quiet, and took it all out in lookin'," Josh went on to say, while he flashed a look of triumph toward the one who had questioned his bravery. "After the man, he had carried the three packages down there, he came out, looked around once more in that suspicious way, and started back for the gate. I saw the colonel meet him out here, and he handed a wad of bills over. Say, I guess, now, there must a been all of a hundred dollars in that lot, if there was one. Whatever she was that fellow brought, it cost high. Then the colonel he came back here, and looked all around; but I lay low, and he never thought I was there in them bushes."

"Then you escaped being discovered, did you?" asked Rod, as Josh paused.

"Well, I did, but it was ony through the closest shave you ever heard tell of; and this was the way it happened," Josh went on, with a wide grin, as though he felt that he had really done something to be proud of. "You see, I happened to be in a pocket, and there was only one way in and out. After the colonel he'd taken himself off, I was thinkin' I'd just better get away, when who should I see acomin' right along that path but old Silas."

"You mean Mr. Goober, the lawyer, don't you?" Rod asked.

"Sure, that same old slick article; and just like he always does, he was turnin' them sharp eyes of his to the right and to the left as he walked. He made me think that he was one of them mountain feud men that's everlastingly expectin' somebody to take a pot-shot at him from the bushes. But believe me, I was some worked up when I saw Silas. 'Cause why as I was telling you, there was only one path in and out of that pocket, an' he was awalkin' straight along the same!"

"Wow! that *was* some exciting, let me tell you!" Hanky Panky found a chance to interject, before Josh could catch his breath so as to continue.

"I saw that he was agoin' to run slap onto me if he kept acomin'; and that it was up to me to shunt him off on a side track in a hurry if I wanted to save my bacon. And let me tell you there was mighty little time left for me to do much high thinkin'.

"Then all of a sudden somebody seemed to call out away back yonder, just so it came stealin' to the ears of Mr. Goober: 'Silas! Silas, come here!' And say, he perked up his head, twisted his neck around, and then turnin' in his tracks, hurried away again."

"Just in the nick of time for you, eh, Josh?" remarked Rod, although he more than half guessed the secret.

"I never made that little accomplishment of sending my voice to a distance pay me bigger results than right then and there, believe me?" Josh hastened to remark, with a trace of pardonable pride in his tones.

"Good for you!" exclaimed Elmer, reaching out and grasping the other's hand, which he shook vigorously, in his warm Southern fashion.

"Then of course you found your chance to get away?" questioned Rod.

"Well, you just ought to have seen me slide, that's all. I've stolen lots of bases in my time, but I never made better time than when I found my chance to get out of that trap. That's the extent of my story, boys. Perhaps there ain't anything much to it, you'll think; but if you could have seen how worried the colonel looked when he came hurrying out to meet that man, you'd say he was mighty much afraid one of us'd pop up, and keep tabs on what he was doing. Why would he act that way if it was only some provisions the fellow was bringin' him? A guilty

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conscience was workin' over–time there, take my word for it."

"And he says, Josh does," Rooster went on to remark, not wanting to be entirely left out of the conversation, "that they wasn't barrels or demi–johns that the man was carryin' into the cellar, either. I asked him that the first thing, because I thought they'd want such things, if so be they was makin' moonshine stuff here."

"Oh! we've talked all that over," Rod hastened to observe, "and come to the conclusion that there's really nothing in it. Colonel Pepper wouldn't bother dabbling in such a picayune business. If he was going in for anything at all, he'd strike for bigger stakes."

"As how, Rod?" instantly demanded the shrewd Josh; "because, if you two have been talking it all over, chances are you've struck pay dirt."

But the other only shook his head in the negative, while Elmer went on to say:

"We haven't come to any conclusion yet, in the matter, boys; although we know that those two strange men who stopped at our camp on the side of the road, and asked us a lot of what seemed like silly questions, are watching this house, because we discovered them on a hilltop with a pair of field glasses focused this way."

"You don't say so?" ejaculated Josh; while Rooster and Hanky Panky, who had fallen back a little, seemed to be disputing over some matter that must have been occupying their attention at the very moment Josh beckoned to them to follow him out to the gate, so that he could impart his stirring news without a chance of being overheard.

"Don't care," Hanky was heard to say, "I found that place first. I was silly to tell you about it; might a known you'd have all the luck, like you nearly always do."

"How many'd you get?" Rooster asked, straight out; and the other shrugged his shoulders dolefully as he replied:

"Never another after that first one; but I saw you pick up a couple; or else you make out to be doin' it, just to make me feel bad."

"I got three!" exclaimed Rooster, triumphantly.

"Then show up, and prove it, else I'll think you're only yarnin'," Hanky Panky went on to say, belligerently.

"Hey! don't b'lieve what I say, then just watch that, and that, and there's the third one, all as bright as anything, and as good as any you ever saw. That's the time I got one on you, Hanky. Sure it's worth crowin' over;" and before Rod could stop him, Rooster had slapped both hands down along his thighs, and given vent to a vociferous clarion call that would have made any barnyard champion of the flock come running, ready to do battle.

Rod, however, was instantly on the alert. He realized that possibly here was another happening that might prove to have a bearing on the mystery by which they found themselves surrounded.

"What is it you're both talking about?" he asked, turning on the disputants. "Let's see what you found, Rooster!"

"Sure I will, Rod," replied the other, as he again dove a hand into his pocket; "but there's no use huntin' around that place in hopes of pickin' up any more of the same blessed things; because me'n Hanky just combed it over and over."

But Rod hardly heard what the other was saying, for his startled eyes were riveted on the three shining discs that lay in the extended palm of Rooster all of them gleaming with newness, and undoubted silver half–dollars!

CHAPTER XXVI. THE SECRET SOLVED.

ROD turned and looked toward Elmer. He found that the other had been staring at the shining coins in Rooster's palm, his eyes round with wonder; and just then these luminous orbs looked into those of Rod himself.

"Whew! is *that* what it is?" Elmer was saying, almost in a gasp.

"Looks mighty much that way," replied the other. "Stop and think for a minute, and you're bound to agree with me. Doesn't everything point in that direction—the alarm shown by Colonel Pepper, yes, and his confederate, Ambrose Frazer, when they saw a party of supposed soldiers around a camp—fire not many miles away. And this other man is in the game too, Silas Goober, who is no more a lawyer than Rooster there can claim to be. He's undoubtedly the ring—leader in the business; perhaps he's been the one who first tempted the colonel to embark in the big scheme of cheating the United States Government, by counterfeiting its silver money."

"But wait up, Rod," objected Hanky Panky, as he eyed the lone piece he had managed to pick up, while the more fortunate Rooster had gleaned three of the same kind.

"Seems like this is a good two—bits, all right. I've tested it with my teeth, and it sure ain't lead."

"No, anybody could tell that at sight," Rooster added, with a wise nod of his head.

"Of course they couldn't be lead," Rod said, evenly, as he glanced around, to see that they were not observed, and that no one was on the porch of the house just then; "and I must say they do look perfectly good. I'd be apt to accept one in a flash, if it were offered to me in change. But all the same, I'm of the opinion that those coins never came from any Government mint."

"Here, you try one, then, and see," Rooster insisted.

Rod bit at the coin, then examined it closely; and finally, turning his back in the direction of the house, so as to make doubly sure he would not be seen, he proceeded to bend down, so as to test the half—dollar on a flat stone.

"Rings all right, don't she?" demanded Rooster.

"Couldn't be better," admitted Rod, after he had made several trials, all of them along the same line; for the "chink" that resulted was as clear as a bell.

"Silver in it, ain't there?" asked Hanky Panky, looking at his coin again.

"Surely," replied Rod; "and I wouldn't be at all surprised if there was every bit as much silver as you'll find in any half—dollar coined by the Government."

"Well, then they ain't counterfeit, after all, then," remarked Rooster, puzzled by these words.

"I wouldn't like to say that," Rod went on to remark. "Perhaps, now, you don't know that it's never been the policy of the Government to put a full fifty cents' worth of silver into each half—dollar they coin. There's a certain per cent. of alloy used to make it hard enough to resist wear and tear. And I've read that if any one were allowed to make the coins, exactly as the mint does, there'd be enough profit on them to bring in quite a handsome revenue."

"But of course the Government wouldn't let anybody do that, because it'd put the mints out of business?" suggested Hanky Panky, brightening up.

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"And who'd ever feel sure that he had a half dollar in his pocket, with the regular amount of silver in it, or not," added Josh. "Of course that'd never do at all, and the Government would have to stop anybody it caught doing such a thing. But say, you couldn't call such a coin a *counterfeit*, could you, Rod, when it's worth exactly as much as the real one?"

"Stop and think, Josh a man may imitate an article exactly, and give just as good a thing; but the minute he puts a false stamp on it, he is liable for infringement. It's the same with money the Government stamp makes a real half-dollar ring true, and worth that much in silver or gold; and the imitator puts that trade-mark on his coin, and tries to make out that it was manufactured by the Government mint. Do you get what I'm trying to explain?"

"Guess I do," said Josh, although there was still a vague look on his face, even while he tried to make out that he grasped the facts."

"And d'ye really think, Rod, they're makin' money in Elmer's old home?" Hanky Panky went on to say, with an awed expression.

"I certainly do believe that is just what they have been doing," replied the other, positively, and with conviction in his manner. "Just how long it's been going on, I wouldn't like to say, but perhaps a year or more. You can see that as these coins are supposed to be fully as fine as the real ones, it might take a long time for the authorities to get on to the fact that the United States mints had a rival in the field; because there would be no complaints. Why should any bank offer a protest when, after testing the coins, they found they came fully up to the standard? But perhaps it began to be noticed that there was an unusually large number of new half-dollars floating about this particular region; and that may have opened their eyes. A close examination might have revealed that these same lacked some little die mark which the coiners knew nothing about, as it was a secret of the mints."

"At any rate," Elmer remarked, "we know that those two sharp-eyed gentlemen are in this neighborhood to watch Colonel Pepper; and with that as a foundation, it all looks mighty simple to me, suh."

"But what ought we to do about it?" asked Rooster, uneasily, as he pocketed the three coins.

Rod smiled at seeing this.

"Listen to me, and I'll tell you the very first thing you two fellows want to do, and it's this," he pursued. "Get rid of those coins, even if you have to throw them away, or bury them. If they were found in your possession they might get you into a peck of trouble later on."

"Gee! that's so," muttered Hanky; and with that he gave his a sudden toss that sent the glittering disc spinning through the air into the bushes.

"I s'pose I'll just have to," muttered Rooster, dolefully; "but it's a mean trick, too, Hanky Panky, and I guess you did the same just because I got three to your one. But if Rod thinks I hadn't ought to keep 'em, why, there they go," and he tossed the three half-dollars aside, though the others noticed that he watched where they fell very exactly, as though in his secret heart hoping that as they were "as good as the real thing," he might have a chance later on to return and get them again; which Rod was determined should never happen, if he could help it.

A serious condition of affairs now faced Rod, and he was perplexed to know just how to handle the case. He realized that he could depend on himself and Elmer to play the game as though nothing out of the usual run had happened; yes, and Josh too, was probably equal to the emergency; but how about Hanky Panky and Rooster? Would one of them say or do something at the supper-table to arouse the suspicions of Colonel Pepper or that crafty Silas Goober, and cause them to keep a watch on their young guests from the North?

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"Above all things," Rod went on to say, "we've got to appear as though we knew absolutely nothing about this affair, and looked on Colonel Pepper simply as the owner of this place; while Mr. Goober is his lawyer friend, visiting him from Chattanooga, to get a little rest from the cares of his very large practice. You understand that, I hope, all of you?"

They immediately assured Rod that they did. Rooster felt that suspicion lay in his quarter, for he was the weakest one of the lot, when it came to telling all he knew. Hence he came out with a very vociferous assent.

"Don't you bother about worrying about me, Rod," he went on to remark, with a confidence that was refreshing, to say the least, though he meant every word; "because I'll be on my guard right along, and keep as mum as an oyster, sure I will."

"That's just it," the other told him, "you may attract attention by seeming to be too quiet. I tell you what you might do, though, Rooster."

"Then go on, and let me know, Rod," urged the other; "I'm willing to obey orders every time; and I understand that there's a heap dependin' on the way the cat jumps here."

"Suppose, then, you make out to have the toothache?" suggested Rod.

"Fine," replied Rooster, immediately screwing up one side of his face, and puffing his cheek out; while he raised his hand and commenced to caress the afflicted part as though in great pain. "That ought to be a good excuse for not talkin' much. But I hope the fact of havin' an achin' molar ain't agoin' to stop me from eatin' my part of the good things that black cook in the kitchen gets up, is it, Rod? Because I'm that hungry right now I could tackle a whole boiled ham."

"Oh! I guess even a fellow with the toothache ought to have a right to get away with his share of supper," Rod assured him; and with that Rooster seemed to be content.

"What ought I to have?" asked Hanky Panky; "a headache, d'ye think, Rod?"

"That would look too much as though we were up to something or other, I'm afraid," the other told him, "but why should you bother, when you can fall back on your magic, and sleight-of-hand to carry you through? We'll let them know about your accomplishments in that line; and perhaps they'll ask you to show them. So you can amuse our host and his friend, and at the same time ward off suspicion."

"Bully for you, Rod; I never once thought of that!" exclaimed the pleased Hanky Panky, rubbing those dexterous hands of his in delight. "And say, I'm glad my little business is agoin' to come in handy for something, after all. Oh! I c'n entertain 'em all right, never you fear. Some fine day I may yet appear before all the crowned heads of Europe, who knows?"

"Well, let's settle this matter once and for all, now, just how we're going to go about things tonight; because we mightn't get another chance to put our heads together," suggested Rod.

And for about ten minutes they exchanged opinions, until a complete schedule was laid out. Each had his individual programme arranged, and had given Rod assurance that he knew what he was to do.

"Now, as it's getting on toward sunset, and the colonel may be wondering what keeps us out here so long, suppose we start back to the house," Rod went on to say. "And above everything else look and act natural, just as though you didn't dream things were any different from what they seem."

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"Wow! but that plagued tooth does give a jump every now and then," groaned Rooster; and then winking toward Rod, he continued: "but then, no matter how she aches, I just *got* to have some supper; 'cause I'm near starved. Me to eat, toothache or no toothache you hear me."

CHAPTER XXVII. READY FOR THE TEST.

COLONEL PEPPER came out of the door just as they sauntered up. Rod thought that he gave them a sharp look; but on the whole he did not wonder at it; for if the other were, as appearance indicated, engaged in such a dangerous practice as coining imitations of the money of the Government, he must be living under a daily strain, and could not see a stranger in the neighborhood without his guilty conscience causing him to anticipate all sorts of terrible things.

Either he must be in the power of the sly Silas Goober; or else the profits of the risky game caused him to defy all these chances of arrest by the authorities.

Elmer immediately commenced to speak of what he had seen in the neighborhood, to remind him of old days, and in this way soon caused the other to lose any uneasy feeling he may have entertained.

The boys presently trooped away to their rooms, in order to wash up for supper. Rod saw the oily Goober appear on the scene just as soon as they left.

"It's just as well that we made up our minds to keep on guard all the time, and not show any sign of knowing anything wrong," he suggested to Elmer; "because I believe that man was watching us from somewhere, all the time we stood talking with the colonel. A single exchange of looks might have told him enough to upset all our plans. 'Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,' we've been repeating at school ever so long now, Elmer, and it's so right now and here."

"I agree with you, Rod," was what the other replied. "We must remember that when Mistah Goober isn't in sight the chances are he's somewhere around watching us, as a cat would a mouse. But we'll fool him yet, see if we don't."

"Who's that you're talking about?" asked Hanky Panky, "suspicious Silas mebbe. He's sure the limit, ain't he? But we're agoin' to pull the wool over his eyes; all the same; that is, if Rooster c'n only keep that headache racket up, so he won't want to chirp, and say somethin' he hadn't ought to."

"'Speak for yourself, John Alden,' said Priscilla," chuckled the said Rooster.

"Every tub's got to stand on its own bottom in this thing, ain't it, Rod? And let me tell you right here, Hanky Panky, when I make out to have the awfulest toothache ever, nobody ain't agoin' to bother thinkin' I'm fakin', either. I c'n do the same to the king's taste. I've had practice, I have. Stayed home from school many a time just that way. Ouch! there she jumps again," and Rooster certainly did give every indication of passing through a most severe infliction, as he propped up one side of his face with his hand.

"That's all very fine, Rooster," remarked Josh, with a chuckle, "but if I was you I'd make sure to remember which side it was that ached. Just a little while back it was the left; and now you're makin' out it's the right side."

Hanky Panky at this commenced to laugh, as though he rather enjoyed seeing the other picked on in this way. Rooster, however, simply looked at Josh in a supercilious way.

"Huh!" he grunted, "what's the matter with you, anyway? Didn't you hear me say right in the beginnin' that this

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here was a *jumpin'* toothache. One time she's on the right side, and then on the left; and I never do know where it's likely to hit me next. Huh!"

"Oh! excuse me, Rooster," grinned Josh; but after that it was noticed that the accommodating toothache always came along on the left side; showing that Rooster at least had taken the hint; which was just as well, for one of the two men might have thought it an uncommonly queer ache that struck in first here and then there, as though all the teeth in his two jaws were on the rampage.

A short time afterwards a bell sounded, and the five boys trooped into the dining-room, chatting and laughing together as though they did not have a care in the wide world.

The colonel was already on hand, but no Silas Goober. Upon Rod asking, he was assured that just before supper-time an urgent message had come from the city requiring the presence of the great lawyer there on a matter of importance, and he had started off. The colonel's car had indeed gone away, but Rod chanced to notice that besides the chauffeur there was not another person in it. Hence he now believed that this report of the Goober's going was a deception, given out for a purpose, possibly to cause the boys to be careless, and when the colonel did not seem to be looking, to exchange signs.

Rod knew that he must put the others on their guard. Accordingly he made a certain sign that they could understand. It was only to blow his nose four separate times, and very loudly; but in so many words it told each of the others what his suspicions were, and that he did not believe the man had left at all, but at that very moment might be where he could observe them, without any one being the wiser.

It warned Rooster that he must play his little part to perfection, just as if a real jaw-racking toothache had fallen to his portion; and that when Hanky Panky started in to show what he could do along the line of magic, he must give a genuine exhibition, and no humbug.

The black "mammy" who cooked for Colonel Pepper certainly did know her business, and Rooster's eyes fairly seemed to stick out of his head as he saw the great piles of tasty food which she proceeded to spread before them.

A hungry boy is hard to hold in, and just as soon as he could, Rooster started to make sad inroads on that supply, as though he was afraid it might vanish before his appetite had been half-way appeased.

Then all of a sudden he would remember that he had a treacherous tooth concealed somewhere about one of his jaws. And the savage way in which Rooster would clutch hold of the lower part of his face, and at the same time allow an expression of agony to steal over his whole convulsed face, was enough to "wring tears from a stone," Rod thought.

It caused Hanky Panky to grin; but then, boys as a rule are singularly heartless when a companion is suffering pain; and if the colonel noticed that broad smile, he did not think it anything odd.

"Does it hurt as bad as that, son?" asked the colonel, as though he really felt sorry for the fellow who seemed to be writhing in such agony. "Now, if so be you cared to trust it to me, I've got a pair of pincers upstairs, an' I've yanked out teeth before now for pet dogs, yes, and coons too. I wouldn't mind going up with you, and trying to ease you some that way, if you say the word. And let me tell you, I pulled the last coon I tackled all around the room; but I got that tooth, remember that!"

But apparently Rooster shrank from having the offending molar touched, as a good many strong men have been known to do under similar conditions; he shook his head in the negative, and refused to utter a single word; but proceeded to once more do justice to the heaping plate before him, as though determined to try and forget his misery, or rather swallow it.

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This was very humorous for the others, and they could not keep from nudging each other; but then that was just what they would be apt to do under normal conditions.

"Don't bother about him, Colonel," said Hanky Panky; "he's the biggest 'fraid-cat ever. I don't believe he'd let you even look at his old tooth, no sir, not if you was to offer him ten dollars," and then Hanky Panky suddenly closed up, for his accidental mention of "money" had given him a thrill, as he recollected that in all probability he and his four chums were right then and there sitting at table with a desperate bogus money-maker, who, if he but knew how close he was to arrest at that minute, would be ready to show his ugly teeth, and do something awful.

Rod, to fill in the awkward gap that followed this sudden halt in Hanky Panky's talk, mentioned the fact to the colonel that one of their number chanced to be a fairly clever sleight-of-hand performer, and an enthusiastic student of the Black Art of legerdemain or necromancy.

This immediately interested the colonel, and he begged that Hanky Panky would favor him with some little exhibition. No one ever had to ask that favor twice of the same Hanky Panky; he was a little vain of his knowledge concerning the field of magic, and only too willing to oblige, if given half a chance.

It would hardly pay us to follow that meal to its long delayed conclusion. Let it be enough to say that the amateur magician gave a splendid demonstration of his powers, and gained much applause, both from the colonel, and also his comrades, who could appreciate a good thing when they saw it.

Why, there was Rooster so taken up with watching his friend Hanky mystify them all, that for nearly ten minutes his silly tooth actually forgot to pain him; and then, as if to make up for neglect, it seemed to give him a wicked jab that caused the poor chap to half jump up from his chair with agony, and go through a series of contortions that might have put him in the class with professional performers in the side show of a circus.

Finally the meal was ended, and they all adjourned to the living-room, where they sat around, and chatted for several hours. At the request of the colonel, who seemed to be enjoying this treat of having a lot of lively high-school boys under his roof, and willing to entertain him, they sang lots of songs; Hanky Panky entertained them to more wonderful "stunts" in the way of magic; and from time to time Rooster would caress his seemingly swollen jaw he had thrust a wad of cotton in his left cheek after supper was over and either groan dismally, or else look unspeakable things; but whenever the colonel gave him a nod, as though asking if he were ready to take the cure, the sufferer would immediately act as though his pain had miraculously disappeared.

Finally the boys began to yawn, for they were in one way really sleepy; and Rod declared that the colonel would have to excuse them, since they must get some rest so as to be in fit condition for the run of the next morning; when they expected to start for Chattanooga, and put in a day or so exploring the famous battlefields by which the Tennessee city is surrounded.

"Good-night then, all of you!" said the colonel, rather genially; though Rod wondered whether he really meant it.

So they went away to their rooms. These were two in number, and connecting. They were also on the first floor, which both Elmer and Rod believed to be a good thing for the carrying out of their little scheme.

"We'll make out to turn in," whispered Rod, as they found themselves in the solitude of the rooms; "and later on, when the house seems to be quiet, why, I promise to wake you all up; for it's just as well that we put ourselves on our guard, so as to be ready for the worst that can happen. Better that five of us meet the trouble, than one, or even two."

"That suits me to a dot, Rod," declared Rooster, as he stretched himself; "and as some time will have to crawl past till then, why, p'raps a fellow might work in a little sleep that is, I mean, if this plagued toothache will let me.

Ouch!"

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE DISCOVERY.

THE stage was apparently set for the last thrilling act in the little drama. All that remained now was for the boys to be patient, until the proper time arrived for them to get busy.

Rod and Elmer had laid out a plan of campaign. As the latter was so familiar with every foot of floor space in the old Tennessee home, Rod depended considerably on him to act as the guide, when they came to the point of making a start.

That their rooms were on the ground floor he counted as something very much in their favor. It would allow them to reach the apartment where the huge country fire-place yawned, in front of which was the hearth-stone concerning which Elmer believed his grandfather's mind was centered, at the time he spoke in his sleep of hidden papers.

Apparently that wonderful toothache which Rooster made such a tremendous fuss over, did not prevent him from going to sleep; for a short time after declaring himself in favor of taking a short nap, he was breathing heavily, and most positively far across the bridge leading to dreamland.

Hanky Panky, yes, and Josh also, thought it wise to follow the example set by the other chum; and in turn they too drifted over to the other shore, leaving the task of keeping watch to Rod and Elmer.

The time went slowly by.

Every little while the two sentries would exchange a few low whispered remarks; but as every preparation that they could think of had already been taken care of, there was really nothing of consequence to talk about.

Naturally Elmer was burning with a desire to put his fortune to the test. It was very aggravating to be so near the object of his anxiety, and not be allowed to start the investigation.

Three separate times did he prod his chum in the side, to say:

"Awake still, Rod; and isn't it near time?"

Whereupon Rod would flash his little electric pocket torch, provided for just this special occasion, as they were passing through Cincinnati; take a peep under the bedclothes at his watch, so that the glow might not serve to betray them to any spying eyes; and in the same cautious tone reply:

"Not yet, Elmer, Have a little more patience. I'll be sure and let you know in good time. But it won't be very long, now."

Then Elmer, stifling a sigh, would drop back on the bed, and try to forget his impatience by allowing his thoughts to travel back to his northern home, where those dear ones dwelt whom he was now trying so industriously to serve.

But at last the happy occasion came when, having nudged Rod for the fourth time, and put the same old question to him, Elmer was thrilled to hear him say in reply:

"It lacks only five minutes of the hour we set for making a move; and I guess we might as well sit up, and get

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things started!"

To wake the others up was the first thing on the programme. Under ordinary conditions this might have been a very easy matter, for boylike, Rod would possibly have only considered it necessary for him to take up some pliable object, like a leather belt, and give each of the sleepers a good sound whack.

This sort of thing could not prevail when silence was so necessary, for Rooster would most certainly let out a vigorous whoop in protest; and no doubt Hanky Panky too, was apt to give a shout, before he realized where he was.

And so Rod bent over one of the sleepers, while Elmer took charge of another. By gently shaking Rooster, at the same time placing a hand over his mouth to prevent any outcry, Rod was enabled to whisper words of caution in his ear. And of course, as soon as the awakened boy had a chance to collect his thoughts, he signified that he understood, and that nothing need be looked for in the shape of an explosion.

All of them were soon moving, and doubtless their hearts beat with much more than their accustomed speed, as they prepared to pass from their connecting rooms into that of the big fire-place, where a great log could be used for heating purposes in cold weather.

To do this it was necessary to pass along a hall, since the living-room chanced to be on the opposite side of the house. The boys had been shrewd enough to leave their heavy shoes off, believing that they were apt to create more or less noise, calculated to betray them, should either of the men happen to be awake, and listening.

Rod had also provided a couple of stout sticks that they had used as canes when out walking. At the time he had mentioned to Elmer how handy these might come in, to take the place of crowbars, when they wanted to pry up the big flat stone that lay in front of the fire-place, and which could not be easily moved otherwise. If grandfather Overton had used it as a cover for his treasure deposit safe, then he must have utilized some such agency to raise the same, that was evident. And yet he certainly had been careful to erase all evidence of the fact; for Rod had been unable to discover the least sign of such a thing when standing there at the fire-place, apparently looking all around him, during the after-noon and evening.

"Are we all ready, Rod?" asked Elmer, in a voice that quivered with mingled suspense and apprehension; for now that the dreadful moment had come when he must put everything to the touch, he began to be fearful of meeting a bitter disappointment.

"Yes, come along, everybody," was the reassuring answer, as Rod started to move along toward the door, which, while closed, he had made sure would open without giving any warning creaks, such as doors so often do; in fact, Rod had managed to put a few drops of lubricating oil from his little pocket flask upon the hinges of that same door, to prevent this very thing.

They fell in after him, and so passed out and along the hall. The house seemed to be very still at that hour after midnight, a fact Rod had noted with more than a little pleasure. It meant so much to them if they could carry out their scheme, investigate the cavity under that wonderful hearthstone, and then, whether success or failure turned out to be their portion, once more return to their rooms, to sleep, if such a thing were possible, until another day dawned.

When clumsy Rooster, trying to do the best he knew how, managed to stub his toe against the doorjamb in passing, and allowed a low groan to well from his lips, all of them stood stock still, listening to learn if the sound could have aroused any one above. But doubtless it seemed five times louder in their excited imaginations than was really the case. At any rate, there did not seem to be any racket, such as would attend the hurried jumping out of bed by either of the men.

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"Wait here for me a minute; I want to unfasten the front door!" whispered Rod, in Elmer's ear, although the other three also caught the low words, such was the absolute silence that hung around them just then.

They were at the entrance of the big living-room when Rod glided away toward the end of the wide hall. Now Elmer knew just why he had gone, for they had talked it over between them; but the others were astonished, and likewise dismayed.

"What is he agoin' to do that for, Elmer?" whispered Rooster.

"Yes, is it so we c'n slip out afterwards, and hurry away from here?" added Hanky Panky.

"Tain't no use," said Josh, briskly, although he too kept his voice toned down to a mere whisper; "'cause they got the barn locked up, with all our machines stored away in the same, you see."

"Sh! not so loud," breathed Elmer; and then, knowing boy nature could not rest until it knew the truth, he went on to explain. "You see, we want to keep our pact with Si Keck. We told him we'd make sure the door was open, so if he had to dash in to help us, the way'd be clear. That's all."

The others gave various kinds of sighs to indicate that they not only understood, but also approved of the scheme. Indeed, just then, while their nerves were quivering with suspense, and the very silence seemed full of grave possibilities, it made them feel better just to know that Si Keck, the untamed moonshiner friend, with perhaps a comrade or two, was crouching on the outside of that same door, ready, yes, willing, to rush in to their assistance, should the owner of the house chance to surprise them in their work, and threaten to make it go hard with them.

Presently they caught a soft gliding sound again. A groping hand came in contact with the arm of Hanky Panky, causing him to shiver, and draw back. But immediately he heard a whisper that told him it was Rod, returned after his little errand.

"Come on, fellows!" said the one who had just joined the little group; and at the same time he tightened his grip on Hanky Panky's sleeve.

So they passed into the great living-room. As soon as the last one had crossed the threshold, Rod softly closed the door. Then he considered it safe to make use of his little torch again, for they must have a certain amount of light to work by, or else their efforts to raise that heavy stone would prove of no avail.

Quickly they hurried across the room, and gathered about the fire-place. The glow being centered on the stone, the balance of the room was either resting in darkness, or nearly so; although Rod had flashed his light around in the first place, just to assure his chums that the apartment was empty.

Now the two stout hickory canes which he and Elmer had cut in the woods, were to come into play. Elmer himself wielded one, while Josh seized upon the other. Rod, as master of ceremonies, and manipulator of the light, directed them just where and how to push the ends of the sticks under the stone, so as to secure a support upon which to train the lifting bars.

Amidst the most intense excitement, although few words were spoken, they were directed when to lift, while Rooster and Hanky Panky stood by, ready to take hold as soon as they could make use of their fingers.

So up came the stone, for it could not resist the united strength, skillfully applied, of all those willing arms. And Elmer's eyes were instantly riveted upon what seemed to be a little packet, done up in oiled cloth, which was snugly resting under the hearthstone; just as he had fondly hoped, after hearing those words spoken by his poor old grandfather in his sleep, when his shattered mind seemed to go back to scenes that ordinarily were as a blank

to him.

The other boys, fortunately, were able to hold the stone up now, for Elmer had quite forgotten that he was expected to keep on lifting. He dropped his stick, and with a low bubbling cry of intense delight, bent down, and snatched the precious packet from the hiding-place where it had lain for some years now, its presence unsuspected by the new owner of the house.

And as he did this there was a chuckling laugh from some point close by, upon hearing which Rod turned quickly, to see a sight that was anything but pleasant.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE MOTORCYCLE BOYS AT BAY.

A DOOR had swung open at the other end of the big room, and this allowed light to enter. The astonished boys discovered Colonel Pepper standing there, armed with a shotgun, and apparently very much in earnest; while his friend, the so-called "lawyer," Silas Goober, who was supposed to be back in Chattanooga at that particular moment, was hastily turning up the lamp which gave the light.

And even at such a thrilling moment Rod could not help noticing that the colonel looked angry and astounded, while the other man was only wearing a broad smile on his thin, contemptuous face, as though he had anticipated something like this disclosure all along.

It was a time that none of those boys would ever forget.

"Oh! now we're in for it!" Rooster was heard to mutter; and it was really something to wonder at that he could find his voice at all, for he was quaking like an aspen leaf, with nervous dread, not at all fancying the looks of that shotgun, or the enraged countenance of the man who carried the same.

"Caught you, did we, you young hounds?" gritted the colonel, finding his voice presently; and he stalked into the living-room as he spoke, his blazing eyes fastened on Elmer, whom he saw trying to conceal something in one of his inner pockets.

Rod managed to collect his wits. He was by long odds the coolest of the entire five. Why, he even smiled in the face of the colonel, as he stepped in front of Elmer, just as if to say that he meant to take the entire brunt of the affair on his young shoulders.

"Hold up your hands, every lasting one of you, spies that you are!" cried the colonel, who seemed to be getting more angry with every passing second; perhaps it was that aggravating look on the face of Rod; or else a sense of what seemed to be the perils that were gathering around him, caused this.

"Why, certainly we will do as you wish, Colonel Pepper," said Rod, leading the example himself by raising both hands above his head. "But I want to say right now, that we're sorry this has happened. We hoped we might carry out our little plan here, and you be none the wiser for it. My friend, Elmer, realizes that it seems to be what he calls a serious breach of good manners, and hardly a thing to be expected in a Southern house; but necessity compelled him to act this way, sir, I give you my word for it. We can explain everything to you."

"Indeed, we can, Colonel Pepper, and I'll be only too glad to do so, if you let me try," added Elmer, warmly, as he buttoned his coat, after having deposited the precious packet therein.

At that Colonel Pepper, true to his name, said some pretty warm things; while the other man laughed in a cold-blooded way.

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"Sounds pretty fine, don't it, Kunnel," the latter went on to remark, in his usual sneering fashion; "to hear 'em talking about explaining things, when the plain fact remains that they came here to spy on you, and learn what they could, to use against you later on. Right now they're huntin' evidence, else why would they go to all the trouble to raise that big stone the way they have. Don't you believe one word they say, Kunnel."

"I won't, you can just wager on that!" growled the man who held the gun, waving his weapon back and forth along the line of five motorcycle boys; so that every time it seemed to aim at Rooster that individual tried to edge toward the shelter of a large easy-chair close by, as if hoping to hide himself back of the same.

"Listen to me," said Rod, believing that since discovery had come it was best to take the bull by the horns; "and what I'm going to tell you, Colonel Pepper, is the absolute truth, nothing less. Elmer's grandfather went out of his mind before they sold this place, and traveled north to Ohio. You already know that, because I heard you ask him how the old man was these days. Well, before that happened, he had hidden some valuable papers away, and was never able to tell just where, so that all these years the family have searched for the same in vain.

"Now, it happened that Elmer heard him talking in his sleep one night, and saying something about 'papers under a big stone.' And when he got to thinking it over, he came to the conclusion that it might mean the old man had hidden them under the hearth-stone he remembered so well in front of the big fire-place in this room.

"We backed him up in it when he declared his belief in that idea, and expressed a great desire to come down here, revisit his old home, and find out if there was any truth in that theory. And sir, we have come here with that plan in view; that, and nothing more. It is true that we felt a little queer about accepting your hospitality, and then apparently abusing the same; but we reasoned that as the papers if there were any, belonged only to the Overton family, and could not be made use of by any one else, we were justified in not bothering you with the story until we had proved it, one way or the other. And that is what we were doing when, unfortunately, you surprised us."

Colonel Pepper seemed to be almost gasping for breath. He turned and looked toward his shadow, as though asking him what he thought of the strange occurrence.

The keen eyes of the so-called lawyer glittered even more than ever. He must have guessed that what Rod had said was the unvarnished truth. After all, these boys from the north had not come there to spy upon the colonel, in the interest of any revenue men; but to carry out what they looked upon as a solemn duty toward one of their number.

But while fear may have taken flight in the mind of Silas Goober, something else occupied its place now, and this was cupidity.

He saw a sudden splendid opportunity whereby Colonel Pepper, and incidentally that would mean himself in the bargain, since they were partners in all things, might gain possession of a large amount of wealth. Why should the colonel not demand that these valuable documents be handed over to him, since he had purchased the property, and all that it contained, from the Overtons. Possession was nine points of the law, and once the securities came into his hands, the colonel could defend his title with all the knavery possible under the statutes of the state of Tennessee.

"This is a strange story he's telling you, Kunnel," he hastened to say; "and if I was you, I'd make him show what he's got. If so be there *did* happen to be any valuables under that same stone, they surely belong to you, as everything connected with this house does. And you'll be a nice fool if you let these kids get away with your property, see?"

This of course aroused the cupidity of the colonel. Up to that time he had been only furious because he believed the boys were spies in the employ of parties who wanted him watched, and possibly some evidence of

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crookedness discovered about the premises; but now a love of gain made him fall in with the idea suggested so craftily by his companion.

He turned upon Elmer, advancing a pace toward the boy, as he thundered out:

"I saw you hiding something in your pocket a minute ago, you young thief! Just produce my property, I tell you, or it'll surely go hard with you. A man has the right to defend his house against thieves, even to the extent of using fire-arms. Whatever was under that stone belongs to me, and I'm bound to take it away from any guest under my roof that tries to appropriate the same. That's the law, which'll back me up in forcing you to hand over what you found here."

"But it's the personal property of my grand-father; and now belongs to my mother, since he has been declared incompetent to manage his affairs," urged Elmer, defiantly, as he looked the angry man full in the face.

Perhaps the knowledge that they had friends close by, who were ready to fly to their assistance if called upon, gave Elmer more or less confidence just then; although had things looked even more gloomy than they did, he was not the one to display the white feather.

"I tell you, I bought everything that was on this place when I gave good money for the same!" bellowed the aroused colonel, greedy to lay hands on the treasure-trove that had all these years been within his reach and he none the wiser for the fact.

"You couldn't buy these documents, because they were never for sale; and I defy you to test your so-called rights in court. I took advice of a lawyer before I came down here, and he told me your case would be laughed out of court, if ever you sued to recover possession of securities that you had never seen or heard of, and which belonged to another man, just because they had been hidden on your land."

The colonel gave a disagreeable laugh at hearing the boy say this; but his face took on a harsher look than ever. Rod realized that there was trouble coming. He understood that the very instant he heard Silas Goober advise his friend he ought never allow those precious papers to be taken away, and that they belonged to the one who had purchased the property, not the family of the man who had secreted them under the stone.

Of course, the boys who had been holding the stone had lowered it again when gruffly ordered to hold up their hands; so that they now had their arms at liberty. This might count for something, should these two desperate men attempt to bully the five half-grown lads. And then, there were the two stout hickory staves with which the stone had been so successfully pried up these were apt to serve admirably in the place of cudgels, should it become necessary for Rod and his chums to defend themselves.

At the same time, Rod knew he ought to be giving that signal whistle agreed upon between the lanky moonshiner, Si Keck, and himself. If ever the motorcycle boys were in dire need of assistance, it was right then and there, when the furious owner of the house had them covered with his gun, and was announcing his intention of forcibly taking the papers, found by Elmer, away from him.

He hesitated no longer, but pursing up his lips, allowed a shrill whistle to peal forth. Not content with one attempt the boy immediately repeated it; and was only kept from continuing the effort by hearing an answering signal from without.

Si Keck, then, was there, and had heard; he would be quick to show up, and keep that solemn promise given to his boy friends, who had been able, through a fortunate circumstance, to do so much for him and his.

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But of course the fact of Rod whistling in this manner told the two men that he was communicating with friends without. It served to add to their fury; and hesitating no longer they sprang toward Rod and his chums, undoubtedly meaning to use brute force in forcing Elmer into giving up what valuable papers he had found.

Rod instantly darted forward, and secured one of the stout hickory canes. It was settled in his mind that he would first of all turn his attention toward the crafty Silas Goober, for he believed that only for him they might have managed to patch up some kind of peace with the colonel, who was not such a bad sort of a fellow, even if he did have a temper that went with his name.

And immediately it seemed as though Bedlam had broken loose in that living-room.

CHAPTER XXX. CONCLUSION.

THE boys stood up as best they could before the rush of the two men; and both Josh and Rod used those hickory canes with considerable effect, in trying to ward off the attack; but in the end might would surely have prevailed, had there not come a sudden interruption.

Several men came rushing into the room, one and all armed with such rifles as every Tennessee mountaineer carries nearly all the time he is upon his native heath.

And the shrill voice of Si Keck was heard, as he ordered the two men to back up, and leave the boys alone, unless they wished to feel the clubbed guns of the new-comers on their heads.

It was Silas Goober who recognized that the scales had changed, so that they were now outplayed. Crafty as ever, he knew when he had had enough. Indeed, his head must be ringing from the effect of the lusty blows showered upon him by Rod and Josh, who had seemed to pick him out especially, when passing their favors around so freely. His hair was disarranged; his coat half torn from his body; and several scratches on his forehead and cheeks told where the nails of Rooster had plowed deeply, when the other attempted to seize hold of that individual.

The colonel had not fared so badly, although Elmer and Hanky Panky undoubtedly struck out boldly when he swooped down upon them; and at the time the moonshiners came on the scene the latter was trying desperately to wrest that shotgun out of the hands of the other, though with indifferent success, for the colonel proved too strong for the boy.

Some of the boys had not come out of the affair unscathed, either, for there had been a rather lively exchange of blows all around. Josh was rubbing the back of his head, as though he had been hurt when thrown against the side of the room by a violent push on the part of the colonel, when he was struggling with Hanky Panky and Elmer. There was Rooster, too, who had been unlucky enough to get up against the end of the gun-stock while it was in motion, and whose left eye promised to go through a little stage of being "in mourning," as the boys say.

But when Si Keck ordered the fight stopped, everybody seemed ready to obey. The owner of the house turned, and stared at the intruders. Perhaps he had half expected to discover several stern-looking strangers, who might turn out to be United States Marshals bent on making an arrest; for the colonel must have had a very uneasy conscience about this time.

"What! is it then only you, Si Keck?" he exclaimed, as though astounded at seeing the tall man of the mountains there, backed up by a couple of his fellows; and Rod believed that there was also a vein of relief about his manner of saying this.

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"I want tuh say, Kunnel Pepper," began the other, sternly, "as them boys be my friends, an' I shore mean tuh stand up fo' the same, through thick an' thin. Yuh mebbe wonder what I got tuh do wid sech as they. I tells yuh, suh, they saved my house frum burnin' tuh ther groun'. An' more'n thet, they done pulled Daddy outen the smoke afore he be quite gone. I promised 'em as I'd keep clost by, an' see as they done gits a squar deal frum yuh. An' I knows all erbout thet same bunch er papers, w'ich berlongs tuh this boy. If he gut 'em, he's shore agwine tuh keep ther same 'case why, me'n my pals hyah'll see him safe away from this house. Now, don't yuh say anythin' agin it, er thar'll shore be a heap uh trouble astirrin'."

"Oh! all right, Si Keck," said Colonel Pepper, realizing that he was no longer in a position to dictate terms as he willed, but must kiss the rod that smote him; "only they must clear out of my house this very night. I decline to harbor snakes any longer, that may turn and strike me when I ain't looking. You hear that, don't you, Elmer Overton?"

The other laughed softly, He was feeling very happy, and contented, now that he could feel that precious bundle of papers inside his coat. Nothing else mattered much, nor did he see any cause to worry because they were to be cast adrift at such an hour of the night, with a storm possibly brewing, if that distant thunder meant anything at all.

"Ce'tainly, suh, we will depart with the greatest pleasure in the world," he went on to say, as he nodded toward the still irate colonel; "and let me tell you, once fo' all, suh, I do not feel any longer that I have violated your hospitality in the least, since you have shown us the kind of man you are. I am glad to know, suh, that you were nevah born in good old Tennessee."

"Get out, the whole lot of you; I never want to set eyes on you boys again. And as for you, Si Keck, perhaps I may see a way later on to make you feel sorry for what you've done to hurt me this night. Clear out, now, and good riddance of bad rubbish!"

The boys did not feel offended in the least when they heard the owner of the place pour out his anger in this fashion. They could understand how cheap he must feel because a party of boys had balked him.

Just as they were about to leave the big living-room, in which all these exciting events had happened, they were astonished to see two men quietly slip through the open door. And when Rod instantly recognized them as the keen-eyed parties whom he and Elmer had last noticed watching the house through field-glasses, from the crown of that neighboring knoll, he guessed that the clouds were gathering darkly around the owner of the Overton place.

"I hope you-all will excuse us from walking in here at such an unholy hour of the night," remarked the leading party, as he casually displayed a rather wicked looking revolver in his hand, and stepped up to Colonel Pepper; "but we happened to be in the neighborhood, and really expected to do this little job the first thing in the morning; so, seeing what was going on here, we changed our minds. You can give a pretty good guess, Pepper, what we want you for!" he added sternly, as he whipped out a pair of handcuffs, the sight of which made the colonel turn pale, and look as though ready to faint. "We have all the evidence needed, ten times over, to convict you and Silas Goober, otherwise Joe Holstein, the notorious counterfeiter, of issuing false coins, and placing unknown thousands of the same in circulation for almost twenty months past. Hold out your hands, and don't try to escape at your peril! The house is surrounded, and we have looked over your fine plant back of the newly made cellar under the right wing!"

The blow had fallen, and both rascals were now in the hands of the Government Secret Service men, who expressed their intention of staying over until morning, and then taking their prisoners, as well as the whole outfit used for making the spurious coins, to Chattanooga, where the men could be placed in jail.

The Big Five Motorcycle Boys in Tennessee Wilds, or, The Secret of Walnut Ridge

And so, after all, Rod and his four chums did not have to go out into the storm, for they found it convenient to pass the remainder of that night in bed, picking up some sleep.

It is doubtful whether Elmer lost himself for even five minutes, up to the time daylight crept into that room; he was so very happy to think that his wonderful little plan had turned out to be such a glorious success, that twenty times his eager hands would touch that packet of papers, which he would not let go out of his possession, as if to reassure himself that it was not all a wild dream; and that he would presently wake up, to find himself once more in his own bed at home, instead of under the familiar old roof of the Tennessee house.

The officers allowed the colonel to close up his house before they drove away in a wagon with both him and Silas Goober. And as the five motorcycle boys passed the outfit on the road, they had the decency to forbear saying anything calculated to make the pair of rogues feel their misery any more than possible.

Of course the two men were found guilty, and are even now serving long sentences for their action in trying to compete with Uncle Sam in issuing money.

The boys lingered several days around Chattanooga, and saw considerable of the famous sights to be met with in that region, where so many battles were fought in those old war times of the far distant past.

They managed to pick up something they thought Si Keck would appreciate, and sent it out to his cabin home. Having learned that the little hunchback boy, and the elfin looking girl had a smattering of a love for music in their souls, from hearing them sing, when they thought no one was listening, the boys concluded that they would enjoy a talking machine, with a dozen records; and later on a letter was received, illy-spelled, and yet full of genuine childish sentiment, thanking them for the wonderful pleasure they had given the children of that rough mountain moonshiner who had so long laughed at the efforts of the revenue officials to catch him in the act of working in his hidden still.

And they would never forget Si Keck, and the lively events that led up to making him their firm friend.

They also heard from Ajax, whose last name proved to be Turner. He succeeded in getting back to his family again, and not only Eliza, his wife, wished to thank the boys who had been so kind to "her man," but "lil George" also made his mark on the soiled paper, and in that way sent good wishes.

"We'll never be apt to run across such a bunch of stirring adventures again, as we met up with during that Tennessee trip on our motorcycles," Hanky Panky was saying one day, while they were camping in Kentucky, having started home by another route on account of those wretched roads.

"You never can tell," Josh remarked.

"And for my part," added Rod, "somehow I've got a hunch coming, now that Elmer has recovered those valuable papers that will bring a fortune to his folks, that before long we'll be running up against another batch of lively times. I don't pretend to be a prophet, or the son of a prophet; but that's my honest opinion; and you tell me if I'm wrong. Pass the coffee-pot, please, Hanky Panky, and none of your black magic either, trying to turn it into a silly old block of wood."

And that Rod's expectations were amply justified can be easily proven, for the five motorcycle comrades certainly did meet with another string of strange happenings; which have been recorded, and set down in another volume of this series, now published under the title of "The Motorcycle Boys Through by Wireless; or, A Strange Message from the Air."