

ROY ROCKWOOD

THE SPEEDWELL BOYS
AND THEIR RACING
AUTO: OR, A RUN FOR
THE GOLDEN CUP

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CHAPTER I

THE MANŒUVERS OF MAXEY

“Say, fellows! Look at what’s coming!”

“Oh, my eyes! See him wabble! Why, he’ll be over the wall into the river, machine and all, if he doesn’t watch out.”

“Say, Dan, did you ever see a fellow run a car as bad as Maxey? If we didn’t know better we’d think he had a fit,” declared Billy Speedwell, who sat with his brother, and several of their chums, on a high, grassy bank overlooking the Colasha River and above the road, a mile or two below Riverdale.

“He certainly does make a mess of it,” admitted the older Speedwell lad, gazing down the road, as were his friends, at a drab-painted automobile which was approaching them.

They were five boys, all members of the Riverdale Outing Club and all rode motorcycles which just now were leaning, in a row, against the bank. The chums had come out after school for a short spin into the country. It was fall, which fact was proven by the brilliant coloring of the leaves.

Beyond where the Riverdale boys lay on the short turf, and coming toward them, was the erratically-guided car. The drab racer seldom kept the middle of the road for a full minute at a time. It actually “wobbled,” just as Jim Stetson said.

And yet the fellow at the wheel of the machine had been driving it up and down the roads for nearly three months.

No instruction, and no practice, seemed to avail with Maxey Solomons, however. His father was one of the richest men in the county, and when Maxey expressed a wish to own and drive a car, Mr. Solomons made no objection. Indeed, the wealthy clothing manufacturer seldom thwarted the least of his son’s desires.

But the drab auto seemed aiming for trouble now. It nearly ran up the bank on the inner side of the road; then it shifted to the other side under the manipulation of Maxey at the steering wheel, just grazing the stone fence that separated the highway at this point from the sheer drop of fifty feet or more to the bank of the river.

“As sure as you live,” cried Monroe Stevens, “he’ll back over the dump!”

The boys with the motorcycles jumped to their feet the better to watch the manœuvres of the drab car and its owner. Shaving the stone wall, Maxey came back into the middle of the road and wobbled along for some rods toward the group of Riverdale youths.

Suddenly the spectators heard the purring of a fast moving car coming from the direction of the town. The road was quite straight for a couple of miles here; but there was a sharp turn behind the group of boys that hid the approaching car.

They knew it was coming at great speed. No warning was sounded on the horn as the car approached the turn. The driver of the unknown auto was very reckless.

Dan Speedwell was first to realize that Maxey Solomons was very likely to get into much more serious trouble than he was having at the moment, if the fast motor car swept around the corner upon him without any warning. It was well known that the only really successful way by which Maxey could pass any vehicle on the road, was by pulling out to one side, and stopping until the other machine went by!

Although moving so slowly, the drab car was steadily approaching the turn in the highway. Maxey was not two hundred yards from where the boys stood upon the grassy bank.

Knowing that he would only startle Maxey by running toward him, Dan leaped away in the other direction. He reached the turn in the road and saw the racing automobile coming in a cloud of dust.

Surely the reckless driver of the machine must slow down to round this curve. Dan Speedwell could see him plainly – a little, goggled-eyed fellow, completely disguised in coat and motor-cap, alone in the driver's seat.

There were two passengers, however, and Dan knew that they must see him as he sprang out upon a jutting tree-root, and waved his cap wildly to attract their attention. One of the men leaned forward and tapped the chauffeur on the shoulder. He pointed to Dan above them on the bank; but the boy's warning motions did not seem to do the least bit of good. The driver of the madly-running car did not reduce its speed.

On came the racing automobile, and the cloud of dust which traveled with it flew down to the curve in the road. The driver shifted his wheel and the machine took the turn on its outer tires, with the others in the air – Dan could actually see daylight between the wheels and the ground.

The boy saw, too, that it was a heavy touring car; that it was painted maroon, and that a blanket, or robe was trailing over the back of the tonneau, fairly dragging in the dust, in fact, and so hiding the plate on which was the license number.

Without a single blast of the horn the car charged around the bend. The group of boys on the bank yelled excitedly at Maxey down below. That erratic youth beheld the maroon car coming and literally "threw up his hands!"

The road was wide enough so that the racing car could have passed Maxey's machine on the outside. But, unfortunately, it had stopped so that the rear wheels, bearing the larger weight of the car, was on the outer slope of the roadway, which was rounded to properly shed the water. The drab car began to run backward. Maxey did not know enough to put on the brakes.

The few seconds that elapsed after the fast-traveling auto came around the bend in the road would not have been sufficient for the chauffeur of that car to stop; and he merely swerved to the outer side of the road, intending to pass Maxey's stalled car at full speed.

Maxey himself was immovable with terror at the appearance of the charging auto. He could not even leap from his seat. And when his own car began to run backward, directly into the path of the other machine, young Solomons only opened his mouth to emit a yell.

The drab car ran back into the shallow gutter. The stone wall behind it needed some repairs, several of the top layer of stones having fallen into the chasm below the road. This left the barrier at the spot scarcely eighteen inches high.

The unguided motor car ran back until its rear wheels came against this broken wall. The chauffeur of the maroon automobile swerved his car again, but only slightly. His heavier machine, running fast, charged down upon poor Maxey and his car like a huge battering-ram.

There was nothing the boys on the bank could do to save Maxey, or his car. And, at that late moment, there was little the wheelman of the maroon car could do to avert the catastrophe. His reckless driving of his machine made it impossible for him to stop in time.

The collision stopped Maxey's cry of fright in the middle. The lighter car was flung up and backward by the swiftly moving and heavier touring automobile. The latter passed on in a flash, and practically unharmed. The drab car was flung over the low stone wall and, upside down, with the cushions and other gear raining from it, dropped into space.

CHAPTER II

DAN SPEEDWELL AT HIS BEST

Billy Speedwell, at the head of the other lads, leaped into the road and sprinted to the spot where Maxey's automobile had been thrown over the embankment. They saw that the unfortunate youth had clung to his wheel; but he had gone out of sight with the wreckage.

Their interest in and sympathy for Maxey blinded them to the further actions of the maroon car and the three men in it. But Dan Speedwell, coming back toward the scene of the catastrophe, noted well the conduct of these men.

The chauffeur had made no proper attempt to avoid the collision; and now he neither slowed down nor glanced back to see what had become of the drab car and its driver.

When Dan Speedwell reached the place where his motorcycle rested beside the road, in company with those of the other boys, the maroon car was a mile away along the straight highway. There was plainly no intention on the part of the three men to stop and inquire as to the damage their car had done.

The other boys thought only of Maxey and his machine. Dan, angered by the indifference of the other automobilists, had no intention of letting them escape if he could help it. His mind was made up on the instant. He seized his wheel and rolled it out into the road.

The balloon of smoke which trailed the flying maroon car was already far down the road. It seemed impossible for a boy on a motorcycle to seek to overtake that flying vehicle. But Dan knew that farther on the automobile could not safely maintain its present pace, and he knew likewise the speed which he could get out of his machine.

Dan and Billy Speedwell had owned their motorcycles a short time only; but within that time they had learned to handle the machines with the best. Both at the Compton motordrome, and in the Riverdale baseball park the Speedwell boys had won high place in trials of speed. These races are narrated in the first volume of this series, entitled: "The Speedwell Boys on Motorcycles."

Their Flying Feathers, the newest model produced by the Darringford Machine Shops, in Riverdale, had been given to the brothers by Robert Darringford whose life Dan and Billy had saved from a fire that had destroyed a part of the machine shop plant.

Their parents were not in circumstances to give the boys such expensive gifts as two hundred dollar motorcycles. Mr. Speedwell owned some dairy cows and a few acres of land on the outskirts of Riverdale, and Dan and Billy delivered the milk to their customers in town, even during the school terms. When this story opened it chanced to be a Saturday afternoon, or the Speedwell brothers would not have been idling here with their friends on the river road.

What Dan knew he could do under favorable conditions with his Flying Feather urged him to start in pursuit of the heartless trio who had left Maxey Solomons and his wrecked car to their fate.

Before the other boys missed him, Dan's machine was popping like the explosion of an automatic gun, and he was several rods away from the scene of the collision. The youth settled himself firmly in his seat, opened his engine to almost its highest speed, and dashed away along the road.

The lad did not sight that car, however, for some time. The river road followed the winding course of the stream itself, and it was fringed with woods for a good part of the way. There were few dwellings on the highway between Riverdale and Upton Falls. The men in the car could have chosen no better stretch of road in the county for escape. There were likely to be few vehicles, and no constables at all at this hour of the day.

It was perilous to run so fast on a public road, even when the way was as smooth and well kept as this highway to Upton Falls. But the act of those men in the racing automobile had roused Dan

Speedwell's indignation. For all he knew, Maxey Solomons had met serious injury in the wreck of his auto; the men guilty of the crime must be apprehended.

On this hard track the automobile ahead left no trail; but for the first few miles Dan was positive that the maroon car had not gone into any by-way. In fact, there were no by-ways save into private estates, and those offered no escape for the fugitives.

The youth was quite sure that the men were strangers in the vicinity; he was confident that the car was not familiar to the locality, at least, for he and Billy were so much interested in the automobile game that there was not a car in this end of the county that they did not know.

The three men were strangers. They had deliberately made it impossible for anyone to read the numbers on the license behind the car. They were evidently of that reckless class of automobilists who ride through the country districts with regard for neither law nor safety.

A few moments only had elapsed since Dan started after the car when he reached the first public cross-road – a highway turning away from the river. But this road was macadamized, too, and offered no trace of the automobile's wheels. However, Dan did not believe the trio in the maroon auto would turn aside, and he kept straight on.

Although the distance to Upton Falls was considerable, the pace of the motorcycle ate up the miles speedily. Dan and his steed of steel came soon to the outskirts of the town. The pedestrians he passed looked after the flying boy with wonder. Dan reached the head of Main street and, as he began its descent toward Market Square, and the hotel, he saw an automobile standing before the wide porch of the latter building.

The maroon car! Dan was sure of it even at that distance. The trio of reckless men who had perhaps injured Maxey Solomons had stayed their flight at the Falls hotel.

Even as Dan sped down the street, however, he observed that the men he followed were climbing into their car again. The blanket had been drawn in over the back seat of the car and the movements of the three were leisurely enough. They were probably convinced that there was no pursuit.

The boy saw several men in the square whom he knew. One was a deputy sheriff and this officer stepped quickly out into the street and held up his hand for Dan and his Flying Feather to reduce speed.

Dan shut off his engine. The maroon car was just starting. The short man at the wheel guided the auto carefully out into the road, and turned toward the highway that led to Barnegat.

"Stop them!" cried Dan, waving his hand at the departing auto. "Arrest those men, Mr. Polk!"

"What do you mean, Dan?" demanded the deputy, running along by the boy's side as the Flying Feather slowed down.

"Do as I say! They've perhaps killed a boy up the road. At any rate, they smashed his automobile. Then they drove on, full tilt, and I followed them."

"Nonsense, Dan! Not those men," cried Mr. Polk.

"Yes they did. I tell you it was a maroon car, with three men in it. I was close enough."

"To see the license numbers?" interrupted the deputy sheriff.

"They had the sign covered. But they came this way and I have followed them too closely to be mistaken. Stop them, I say!"

"Dan! you don't know who these men are," gasped Mr. Polk, as the motorcycle came to a halt and the excited boy leaped off.

"I don't care who they are!" declared Speedwell, his righteous indignation still inspiring him. "I saw what they did –"

"Are you sure? Can't you be mistaken?"

"Didn't they just come from Riverdale?"

"Ye-es. They came from that direction."

"And I have been chasing them. There was no other car."

“But the gentlemen are beyond suspicion of any such act as you relate, Dan!” cried the deputy sheriff. “One of them is Thomas Armitage, of Compton, and the other is Raleigh Briggs, who has offered the prize for the cross-country run of a thousand miles which is to be arranged next month – you’ve heard of it. Why, Dan, neither of them would allow his chauffeur to commit such an act of violence as you relate.”

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY OF THE MAROON CAR

Dan Speedwell was completely taken aback by this statement of the deputy sheriff. He knew that Mr. Polk must have surety for his words. The men in the maroon automobile were well known and perfectly responsible citizens.

Indeed, as Dan wheeled his motorcycle nearer to the car he saw that the two in the tonneau of the auto were much different-looking individuals from those he expected to find. The men who had wrecked Maxey Solomons' auto, and perhaps killed the young man himself, would certainly not possess the personal appearance of these gentlemen!

Mr. Briggs Dan knew by reputation. He was the most enthusiastic motorist in Crandall County. The thousand mile endurance test which he had suggested, and to the winner of which he had promised a gold cup, interested Dan and Billy Speedwell not a little, although they owned no automobile, and at this time had no immediate expectation of getting a car.

"What does the young man want, Polk?" inquired Mr. Armitage, a gray-mustached man with a ruddy face and pleasant smile. "He asked us to stop; didn't he?"

"There's a mistake been made somewhere, Mr. Armitage," declared the deputy sheriff, with some hesitation. "Dan is a good boy, and trustworthy. But it seems he has been following you and Mr. Briggs on his motorcycle – "

"What for?" asked the gentleman, quickly.

"Because of something that happened up the road. He says that the automobile he followed wrecked another machine and hurt the driver."

"Our auto?" cried Mr. Armitage.

"Why, Dan says it was a maroon car, like yours, and that it came direct from Riverdale."

"By which road?" asked Mr. Briggs, quickly.

"The river road," said Dan. "I was sure I had followed the right car – there was no other all the way."

"But we did not come to the Falls that way," said Mr. Briggs. "We traveled by the pike, and we stopped at Mr. Maury's place for some minutes."

"Oh, I know it could not have been your machine," said Dan, hastily. "The men who ran down Maxey Solomons have escaped by some means. They must have taken a cross road toward the other side of the county."

"You did not get their number?"

Dan quickly related the incidents which had brought him to this place, and in such haste. The gentlemen in the car were sympathetic and interested.

"Come!" said, Mr. Armitage, "this matter must be looked into. The rascals should be apprehended. They are getting farther and farther away each minute, it is likely. Come, Briggs, what do you say? You have been bragging about the speed of this car. Let's see what Henri can get out of her."

"I am with you, Armitage," declared his friend. "Hop aboard, Polk. You are a county officer. Those men must be arrested, if possible, and held until we learn what damage they have done."

"I'll go with you, Mr. Briggs," said the deputy.

He leaped into the tonneau. Mr. Armitage looked at Dan, who stood by his motorcycle.

"The boy had better go with us," said Mr. Armitage. "He is evidently an observant lad, and he will not be likely to make a second mistake in the automobile."

"Yes! let the boy come," said Mr. Briggs. "If he was a witness to the accident he speaks of, we will need his testimony if we overtake the guilty ones."

“But my machine?” said Dan, doubtfully.

“Lift it right up here,” commanded Mr. Briggs. “We’ll fasten it on the running board. Then, young man, you get in beside Henri, and we’ll be off.”

Dan was quick to obey these suggestions. His Flying Feather he stood upright on the running board of the car, and he saw that it was fastened securely. In five minutes they were off, after Mr. Polk left word at the sheriff’s office for the officers to watch for the mysterious car and its three occupants.

The auto dashed off along the pike toward Riverdale. There were three cross roads that the offenders against law might have taken, as long as they did not complete their run to Upton Falls. But there were by-roads, too, on which they might have hidden and the deputy sheriff advised stopping to inquire at every farmhouse, and of every teamster whom they met. It was some time, however, ere they picked up the trail of the maroon car, and then they obtained the clue in quite a strange way.

As they came to the lane leading up to a barn, the farmer came running out with a pitch fork in his hand. Before Mr. Polk could speak, the man demanded:

“Ye got ’em, hev ye, Sheriff? Wa’al I’m glad of it! I’ll go right down with ye t’ th’ ’squire’s office, an’ I guess, he’ll make ’em pay a pretty price for their fun. That calf of mine run int’ a barbed wire fence an’ tore herself all up – ”

“Hold on, Mr. Jackson!” exclaimed the deputy. “You’re getting your dates mixed, I guess. These gentlemen certainly have done you no harm.”

“No harm!” yelled the farmer. “When they come up through the Indian Bridge road not an hour ago, they skeered my heifer into a conniption fit, and come pretty nigh runnin’ over *me* when I come out at ’em.”

“Not *these* gentlemen,” said Polk. “I can vouch for them. One is Mr. Thomas Armitage, whom you ought to know, Jackson.”

“I swan!” exclaimed the farmer. “I voted for him for Congress.”

“Much obliged to you, I am sure,” said Mr. Armitage. “And I hope that you will not think I so illy deserved your vote as to race an automobile through these roads to the endangering of life and limb of good citizens.”

“Wa’al!” ejaculated the puzzled Mr. Jackson, “it was a car jest the same color as yours, Mr. Armitage.”

“And how many men were in it, Mr. Jackson?” interposed Polk.

“Come to think on’t, there warn’t but three,” admitted the farmer.

“Did you see the license number?”

“Not much! They went so quick I couldn’t see much but the color of the car.”

“And in which direction did they disappear?” asked the deputy.

The farmer pointed up the side road, away from the river.

“They are making for the railroad,” declared Mr. Briggs, in some excitement. “Drive ahead, Henri.”

They came to the railroad – the Barnegat & Montrose Branch of the R., V. & D. – and halted long enough to speak to the flagman. He had seen the flying car, too. They were on the right track.

But a mile beyond the pursuing party came to a place where the highway branched in three directions. There was no house in sight. The escaping car might have taken any one of the roads.

“We’re stuck!” ejaculated Mr. Polk. “We might as well take one at random and see if we can run down a clue upon it.”

“Wait!” urged Dan Speedwell. “Perhaps I can do better than that.”

He got out of the machine and ran into the first road at the right. He had noticed that these highways here were not so well made as those nearer the river. There was a chance that he might find some trace of the passing of the strange car which they followed.

And he was right in this surmise, although he did not find it in this first road. Marks of the tires of an automobile – and fresh marks – were visible in the middle road. As far as Dan could see no other machine had passed this way.

He leaped back beside the chauffeur and they drove on again at top speed. A mile beyond they halted at a farm house to inquire. The passing of an automobile in a cloud of dust had been noticed less than an hour before; but the sight was too common to have attracted much attention, and the occupants of the house had been too far from the road to note the color of the machine, or the number of men in it.

Mr. Briggs' car was certainly fast, and Mr. Briggs' chauffeur was the most marvelous manipulator of an automobile that Dan Speedwell had ever seen. And to sit directly beside the Frenchman and observe the skill and art with which he handled the levers and the wheel was a sheer delight to the boy.

He thought to himself:

"Ah! if Billy and I only owned an auto! If we could only take part in this endurance test that Mr. Briggs is going to arrange! If we could handle an auto half as well as this Frenchman!"

But the boy's thoughts were disturbed suddenly by Mr. Polk, who remarked:

"It looks to me as though these fellows were aiming for Port Luther, or even Cadenz. Unless they turn back toward Riverdale and Compton they will be obliged to strike some of the coast towns."

"Quite right, Polk," admitted Mr. Armitage.

"Then, here is Landers Station just ahead. There is a train coming down now. I'll take that train and go on. The railroad is more direct than the highways and I may be able to head those fellows off at Port Luther."

"And we stick to the trail in the car, Polk!" agreed the gentleman. "What do you say, Briggs?"

"It suits me. Henri, shall I take your place for a while?" Mr. Briggs asked his chauffeur.

"The young man here will change with me, Monsieur," returned the kindly Frenchman, who had seen how eagerly interested Dan was in the management of the automobile.

And when they halted at the railroad station to allow the deputy sheriff to take the train, the chauffeur did indeed change places with Dan Speedwell. Once at the wheel the youth proved that Henri had not been mistaken in him. For a lad of sixteen Dan handled the car with great dexterity.

The maroon car was out of sight of the station before the train bearing the deputy was on its way again; but the automobilists were obliged to halt frequently to inquire for the motor car of which they were in pursuit. And there were more autos than one ahead of them now. Sometimes they lost the trail of the maroon car completely; but when they reached the lively little town of Larned they learned that the fugitives had halted at the local garage for gasoline, and that they had left, still following the road toward the coast, but at a moderate pace.

"Half an hour behind them – or thereabout," exclaimed Mr. Armitage, with satisfaction. "We should be able to pick that up."

But even as they started from the garage they met with an accident. A forward tire blew out and the car came down with a solid bump on the roadway.

"Now!" cried Mr. Armitage. "Look at this delay! Isn't it abominable?"

But Mr. Briggs was a man of quick thought. He was observant, too. He spoke to the owner of the garage. There was a good car standing on the floor and it was for hire. In two minutes it had been run out, Henri was at the wheel, and Mr. Armitage and Mr. Briggs in the tonneau of the hired machine.

Dan had expressed his desire to return to Riverdale. It would soon be night, and he and Billy had many chores to do. They were now thirty miles from home, and the boy feared to go farther without permission from his parents.

"And quite right," Mr. Armitage said. "But hold yourself ready to-morrow, my boy, if we have the good fortune to overtake those fellows in the maroon car. We shall need you for a witness."

Dan promised and Mr. Briggs, who had consulted with Henri for a moment, said:

“My chauffeur tells me that you are quite able to run our car back to Holliday’s garage at Riverdale. This man here will put on a new tire and you can get back to town easier in my car than on your machine. Do you want to do me that favor?”

Dan’s sparkling eyes and flushed face replied for him before his lips could form the words. It was so decided, and the others got off quickly in the hired auto. Within the hour Dan started the beautiful touring car on the back track, delighted with his charge, and looking forward to nothing more than a pleasant run over familiar roads to his home town.

It was growing dusk, however, long before he reached Riverdale. Indeed he was all of ten miles from the town when he stopped to light his lamps. Before he started the auto again he observed another car bearing down upon him from ahead, its lights blazing in the dusk.

Dan had pulled out to the side of the road and apprehended no danger. But the coming car was braked quickly when a few rods from him, and its driver brought it to a complete stop beside Mr. Briggs’ vehicle.

One of the four men in the machine leaped out and, to Dan’s amazement, stepped into the front of the maroon car beside him.

“Hold up your hands!” commanded this man, in excited tones. “We’ve got *you*, at least, if your pals have escaped. Hold up your hands!”

Dan shrank back and demanded a reason for threatening him in this savage way.

“You know what I want,” said the man. “You are in the hands of the law. I arrest you, for the robbery of the Farmers’ National Bank at Riverdale!”

CHAPTER IV

BILLY ACTS ON IMPULSE

The sight of Maxey Solomons and his automobile tossed over the embankment and out of view – as a mad bull might toss a dog – frightened Billy Speedwell and his mates; at the moment they did not, like Dan, think of bringing the three men in the maroon motor car to account for their rashness.

With cries of fear they ran along the road to the broken place in the stone wall. Motor car and driver had disappeared over the brink of the chasm. The tops of several trees, the roots of which were embedded in the soil of the river bank, were visible above the wall. The motor car had crashed into these tree-tops; but the boys did not dream, at first, that the branches would stay such a heavy object.

When they came to the break in the stone wall and leaned over it, they saw the drab automobile hanging in the air, not more than twenty feet below the road. It was upside down and it had stuck in the crotched branches of two of the tall trees.

At first they saw nothing of Maxey; but of course, they could not see to the ground at the foot of the fifty-foot precipice over which young Solomons and his automobile had fallen.

“He’s dead!” groaned Monroe Stevens.

“Crushed to death down there – poor chap!” agreed Jim Stetson.

“My goodness!” said Billy. “Who’ll tell his father? The old gentleman will be all broken up. He just about lived for Maxey.”

“And the auto isn’t worth a cent, either,” added Brace Henderson.

At that moment a muffled voice reached their ears, and startled them all.

“Help! Mercy on us – isn’t this dreadful? Help!”

Billy cried his surprise ahead of the others:

“It’s Maxey! He is under the auto!”

They could not see the owner of the wrecked car – not even his legs dangled into view. But Maxey’s voice was unmistakable.

“What you doing down there, Max?” cried Monroe Stevens, loudly. “Why don’t you crawl out?”

“I can’t!” wailed the voice of the hidden youth.

“Why can’t you?” queried Henderson.

“I don’t dare,” admitted Solomons.

All the cushions of the automobile had rattled to the ground. Its driver was clinging to the wheel, or some other stationary fixture, and not being a particularly brave youth, he could only hang on.

“Somebody’s got to help him,” declared Billy.

“But we haven’t a rope,” objected Jim Stetson. “How can we get him up here?”

“Belts, boys!” cried the quick-witted Billy Speedwell. “Buckle ’em together. I can jump into the top of one of those trees, and I’ll carry the line of belts down, fasten it to the tree, and then to Maxey, and swing him off.”

“You’ll fall, Billy,” objected Monroe, who was older and felt himself responsible for Billy’s safety, now that Dan had gone.

“Not a bit of it!” declared Billy. “Come on with the belts.”

There being no better way suggested, the boys followed Billy’s plan. They watched him in some trepidation, however, as he let himself over the broken wall and leaped for a swinging branch of one of the trees into which the automobile had fallen.

He reached a limb directly below Maxey. That young man was clinging – as Billy had supposed – to the steering gear. He was afraid to drop upon the limb where Billy stood. Indeed, had he done so, he would have had no means of balancing himself. Billy Speedwell had kicked off his shoes before descending the tree and he was barely able to keep his equilibrium.

“Catch the end of this belt, Maxey!” he cried.

“Oh, I can’t!”

“I tell you that you’ve got to!”

But, although Maxey was usually easily influenced, Billy could not put pluck into him at this juncture. The younger boy had to finally climb into the overturned automobile, cling with one hand and his feet to the car, and buckle an end of the string of belts around Maxey’s waist.

The rescuer tossed the end of the line of belts to Monroe and Brace Henderson, and they helped Maxey out upon the roadway again. Billy followed, and when the adventure was over not alone Maxey Solomons, but the boys of the Riverdale Club, felt the reaction. The peril threatening the owner of the wrecked automobile had indeed been great.

“I’m afraid your car is done for, Maxey,” said Monroe Stevens, with sympathy.

“I don’t care!” sighed the rich man’s son. “I wouldn’t ride home in it if it was right-side up here in the road. I never want to ride in a motor car again.”

“Pshaw!” said Jim. “Now you’re talking reckless. It’s too bad you’ve got the car in that bad fix.”

“I tell you I don’t want the car. If it can be got out of the tree I’ll sell it. I won’t ever ride in it again.”

“You don’t mean that, Maxey?” said Billy, earnestly.

“Yes, I do.”

“But it’s a new machine.”

“I’d sell her for half what she’s worth,” Maxey persisted.

Monroe Stevens laughed, and said: “According to your own tell, Maxey, she isn’t worth anything.”

“But, if anybody thinks she’s worth buying?” began the owner.

“Isn’t that just like you?” cried Jim. “I suppose you’d want half what your father paid for her.”

“I might want – but would I get it?” returned Maxey, shrewdly.

“Just *what* will you take for the car?” demanded Billy, still in earnest.

Monroe Stevens looked at Speedwell suddenly, and with interest.

“My gracious, Billy! I forgot that you and Dan are capitalists. You *could* buy old Maxey out, couldn’t you?”

“So he could,” cried Jim. “Billy and Dan banked the thousand dollars reward the Darringfords offered for the apprehension of the fellow who set the shops afire. Now, Maxey, if you really want to sell, you’d better put a real price on your car.”

Billy flushed. He was stirred by impulse to buy the wrecked car. He had seen just how badly it was smashed and he knew that if Maxey would sell cheap enough somebody would get a bargain. The drab racing machine was of a standard make and there was good reason why Maxey might have thought of entering it in the thousand mile endurance run. A car of the same kind had won such a contest only the season before.

Young Solomons looked at Billy thoughtfully. Something seemed to be working in his mind.

“You came down and saved me, Billy Speedwell,” he said. “Of course, the other boys helped, and I’m grateful to all of you. But Billy came first to my help.”

“Shucks!” grunted Billy. “Forget it!”

“No. I’m not likely to forget it,” returned Maxey, gravely. “If you want that car – just as it lies there in the tree-top – you can have it for five hundred dollars. She cost twenty-two hundred and fifty. I can show you the receipted bill.”

“Whew!” cried Jim. “You don’t want anything for it, do you, Maxey? I don’t believe you can get it out of the tree.”

But Billy had made up his mind already about that phase of the matter. And how he wanted to own that racing car!

He and Dan had watched the auto as it was handled by the professional chauffeur, and knew that it was a wonderfully good machine. But if the car was lifted safely back to the road, it would cost a good deal to rebuild it and put it in running shape again. Still —

“I’ll think about it, Maxey,” he said, slowly.

“No, Billy,” said the owner of the wrecked car, seriously. “If you take time to think about it, so will *I* take time to think about it. I won’t feel the way I do now, to-morrow maybe. You see? You can have it *now* for five hundred dollars. I maybe won’t want to sell at all when I think about it a while.”

Both Dan and Billy had put their money into the bank untouched. Billy had just an even five hundred dollars. He could not expect Dan to back him up with any of his money in such a wild bargain as this. But there was the car — Billy believed it could be saved and repaired for a comparatively small sum — and one-fourth of its purchase price, for a car less than three months old, was a bargain indeed!

Billy took it.

CHAPTER V

THE ROBBERY AT THE BANK

Dan Speedwell, in Mr. Briggs' maroon car, was at first badly frightened, and then angry. The pressure of the muzzle of a revolver against his stomach precluded his seeing the humor of the situation.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed. "Take it away!"

"Surrender!" cried the man with the weapon, and then Dan realized that his captor was Josiah Somes, one of Riverdale's constables, and a pompous, officious little man.

"Surrender, in the name of the law!" repeated Mr. Somes, using the instrument a good deal like a gimlet.

"Oh!" gasped Dan. "Who do you think you've got hold of, Somes?"

"Eh? Ye know me, do ye?" growled the constable. "Then, Mr. Bank Robber, you know that Josiah Somes ain't to be fooled with."

"I don't want to fool with you when you act so careless with that pistol. Take that gun away!" cried Dan.

"Hold up your hands!" ordered Mr. Somes. "I've got to search you."

By this time one of the other men in the strange automobile, had gotten out, and brought a lantern to the side of the maroon car. He flashed the light into the boy's face, and at the same moment Dan recognized Hiram Baird, the cashier of the Farmers' Bank.

"Mr. Baird!" gasped Dan. "Take him away, will you?"

"Dan Speedwell!" rejoined the cashier, in amazement. "Why, how is this?"

"One of them Speedwell boys!" cried Somes, glaring into Dan's face, and dropping the pistol's point, to Dan's great relief.

"That's certainly who it is," said the cashier of the bank.

"Wa'al! It's nothing more than I could expect," said Somes, shaking his head. "Them boys are always racing around the country on them motor wheels of theirs – huh! Where's the other robbers?" and he grabbed Dan by the collar.

"What do you mean?" demanded the boy, angrily.

"You helped them get away," declared the constable. "The car was seen standing before the door of the bank after hours. They shut Mr. Baird into the strong room and he was almost smothered before the president came back and found him there."

This garbled account of a very interesting happening was sufficient for the moment to explain his position to Dan. He knew now why the trio of men in the first maroon car had refused to halt when they had wrecked Maxey Solomons' automobile.

"You've made a mistake, gentlemen," said Dan, quietly. "I really wish you would put up that gun, Mr. Somes. You'll do yourself, or me, an injury."

"Yes, do put away the pistol, Josiah," urged Mr. Baird.

"But this young villain –"

"Nonsense, Josiah!" exclaimed the cashier. "We know Dan is not mixed up in the robbery."

"Then how came he by the car? A maroon car. This is it – I'm positive of it."

"No it isn't," declared Dan.

"But, really, Dan," said Mr. Baird, puzzled, "I saw the car stop at the bank door myself, and this one looks just like it."

"And what happened then?" asked Dan, curiously.

"Two men came in. The third sat where you do – in the driver's seat. It was after three, but the door had not been locked. I was alone. One of the men covered me with a pistol, and the other locked

the door. Then they backed me into the vault and locked it. We had not put away the money. They got fifteen thousand dollars in bills and specie. They might have got much more had they known where to look for it. I had to stay in the vault until Mr. Crawley came in at half-past five.”

“And they sent for *me*,” added the pompous Somes, “and put me on the case. I remembered, of course, seeing this maroon car standing by the bank.”

“Not *this* car,” urged Dan, again.

“Why ain’t it?” snapped the constable.

“Because this car is the property of Mr. Briggs – and you don’t accuse him of being a bank robber, do you?”

“Mercy!” ejaculated Mr. Baird. “One of our largest depositors!”

“Well!” cried Somes. “How came you with the machine?”

Dan repeated the narrative of his adventures that afternoon and evening. Mr. Baird, of course, saw how reasonable it was, and believed him. Somes disliked to say he was mistaken.

“I think I’d better arrest him, and take the machine back to town, Mr. Baird,” he said.

“Nonsense!” exclaimed the cashier. “Get into Mr. Crawley’s machine here, and let us follow the trail Dan has told us of. Perhaps Mr. Armitage and Mr. Briggs have caught up with the thieves.”

Dan was much excited by the story of the robbery. To think that the bold thieves had ridden down the river road out of the town, and within a short distance of the scene of their first crime, had committed the desperate act which (so Dan supposed) had brought about Maxey Solomons’ serious injury, or death, and the wrecking of that youth’s automobile! They were certainly desperate characters. He hoped, with all his heart, that the gentlemen whom he had left in pursuit, and Deputy Sheriff Polk, would apprehend them. But he did not believe Josiah Somes would be of much aid.

Dan came safely to Holliday’s garage and delivered the maroon car, to be called for by its owner. Then he got upon his Flying Feather and motored home as quickly as possible, for it was already late and he and Billy had the milk to pick up at Mr. Speedwell’s dairies.

His younger brother had arrived at home ahead of him; but before he left town Dan had learned how Maxey Solomons had been saved. Billy, however, had something on his mind, and he even listened to Dan’s tale of his “arrest” by Josiah Somes without showing very much interest.

“What’s the matter with you, boy?” demanded Dan, as they finally finished the chores about the stable and milkhouse and sat down a few minutes on the granary stairs before going into the house for the night.

“What makes you think there’s anything the matter?” returned Billy, quickly.

“Come on, boy! ’Fess up,” laughed Dan. “What’s on your mind? If it’s anything good, don’t keep your brother out of it; and if you’re in a fix of any kind, maybe I can help you.”

“You’re all right, Dan. But I reckon this is something I’ve got into myself, and I mean to stand by it,” admitted Billy. “I expect you’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Don’t know. Can’t say. Open up!” urged his brother.

“Well – I’ve bought an automobile!” blurted out Billy Speedwell.

“You’ve done *what*?”

Billy repeated his statement, gloomily enough. Dan stared at him in the light of the barn lantern and remarked:

“Well, you don’t look any crazier than common. And I expect you’re telling me the truth. But I don’t understand it. How did you buy it – from whom – what with?”

“Hold on!” exclaimed Billy. “Let me tell you all about it.”

“That’s right. It don’t sound very real to me,” said Dan, rubbing his head. “By the way, where’s the machine?”

“Up in the air,” returned Billy, with a grin.

“Huh! in a garage attached to one of those ‘castles in Spain’ that they tell about?”

“I bought Maxey’s wrecked machine. I paid five hundred dollars for it – or, I promised to do so on Monday – and I don’t even know whether I can get the thing out of the tree where it’s roosting!”
Billy blurted all this out in a hurry. The information left Dan fairly speechless.

CHAPTER VI

A FIRST DIFFICULTY

“For goodness sake tell me all about it, Billy,” urged Dan.

His brother did so, relating the particulars of how Maxey Solomons had been rescued from the automobile and the conversation which had followed.

“You know how Maxey is. He changes his mind mighty easily. And, Dannie, I really believe the car is worth a whole lot more than five hundred dollars.”

“But it’s every cent you’ve got, Billy!”

“I know it. That’s what’s bothering me. It’s going to cost something to hoist the car out of the tree, and then it’ll cost I don’t know how much to put it into shape again – as much as fifty dollars, perhaps.”

“Is that all, Billy?” queried his brother, in surprise.

“The car isn’t damaged much. I found and saved everything that dropped out of it when it was overturned. The thing is wrenched some, I suppose, and dented and marred. That’s all. And it cost over two thousand dollars.”

“I know,” said Dan, nodding. “I know all about it. I rode in the car one day with Maxey, too. It’s a dandy!”

“You bet it is!” cried Billy, eagerly, and evidently much relieved because his brother took the news as he had. “Suppose we could fix it up and enter for the gold cup that Mr. Briggs has offered? Wouldn’t that be great?”

“That’s all right, Billy. I’ll go over and look at the car with you on Monday. Perhaps we can get it onto the road without much trouble. But say! I never knew you to be so selfish before, boy.”

“How?” grunted Billy, in surprise.

“Why, you might have given a fellow a chance to buy in with you.”

“Dannie!”

“Going to have it all to yourself, are you?”

“I thought you’d say I was crazy to do it,” explained Billy, eagerly. “I have been afraid to tell mother and father. Of course, they said we could do exactly what we pleased with that money the Darringfords gave us – ”

“Don’t worry about it. I believe you’ve made a good investment,” declared Dan, confidently. “And if you’ll sell me a half interest in the car, I’ll draw out half my money, and then we’ll divide the cost of repairing the machine between us.”

“Bully!” shouted Billy, smacking his brother on his sturdy shoulder. “That will be fine.”

“I’d do the same for you, Billy-boy,” said Dan. “And I’m just as eager to enter that endurance test as you are.”

“And suppose we could win the cup, old boy!”

Dan chuckled. “We’ll have an old rival in that run – if we have the luck to get into it.”

“Who’s that?” demanded his brother.

“Chance Avery. Burton Poole has taken him into partnership in his motor car. You know, Poole’s got a good car. Chance has been rather out of conceit with the motorcycle business ever since the races at the baseball park.”

“When you walked away from him, eh?” said Billy.

“But I heard him bragging down to Mr. Appleyard’s store yesterday that he and Burton were going to have a try for the gold cup – and they expected to ‘lift’ it.”

“It’s just providential, then,” said Billy, seriously, “that Maxey’s machine was wrecked, and I got a chance to buy it.”

The Speedwell family numbered but six – besides the parents and Dan and Billy, there were only Carrie, ten years old, and Adolph, who was just toddling around and learning to talk. They were, in spite of their somewhat straitened circumstances, a very happy family. Mr. Speedwell was not a strong man, but was gaining in health now that he worked out of doors instead of in a shop. With the help of his two big boys (Dan was sixteen and Billy a year younger) he was making the small dairy pay.

Although the boys had long ridden bicycles, and still owned their steeds of steel, the motorcycles on which they had taken their spin along the river road that day had been presented to them by Mr. Robert Darrington, and were the best wheels the Darrington Machine Shops could turn out. Now the fact that Dan and Billy were about to own an automobile was indeed a matter for discussion and interest around the evening lamp.

“For a poor man’s sons, I believe you two are doing pretty well,” remarked quiet Mr. Speedwell. He never went back upon what he said; having told the boys they could do what they pleased with the thousand dollars they had earned, he was not likely to criticize Billy’s impulsive bargain.

That afternoon Dan and Billy hurried home on their machines and went at once to the woodlot with their axes. They cut and shaped two white-oak timbers, loaded them into the heavy wagon with such timber chains and ropes as they chanced to have about the barns, and drove back through the town and out upon the river road to the spot where the accident had occurred.

Jim Stetson and Wiley Moyle, both members of the Riverdale Outing Club, and in their same grade at the local academy, saw the Speedwells driving through town, and they climbed into the wagon.

“By gravey!” ejaculated Wiley. “I didn’t believe it when they told me. Do you mean, Billy, that you’ve given up five hundred good dollars to Maxey Solomons for that smashed-up car?”

“Dan and I have bought it,” admitted Billy, cheerfully.

“You must both be crazy, then,” declared young Moyle. “You’ll never get it out of those trees without smashing it all to bits. What do you want a motor car for, anyway? You’ve got motorcycles; and it wasn’t long ago you were riding bicycles like the rest of us. The club will go to the dogs if all the members get buzz-carts.”

“Don’t you fret,” returned Dan, laughing. “As long as we can keep Captain Chance Avery in bounds, you fellows who ride bikes will not be neglected in club affairs.”

“Remember how Dan fought for you at the meeting following the Barnegat run,” said Jim. “And he and Billy owned their motors then.”

“But an auto is different,” grumbled Wiley. “Look at Burton Poole – and the Greenes. They don’t care about going on the club runs at all any more because the autos have been shut out.”

“Fisher Greene isn’t stuck on the things,” said Billy, laughing.

“No. There’s never any room for Fisher in the car,” said Jim Stetson, “and he has to stick to his old bike.”

Although Wiley was such a “knocker,” as Jim expressed it, he lent a sturdy hand to the unloading of the wagon. Dan had brought tools, and after carefully planning the arrangement of the contrivance he proposed building, the elder Speedwell began digging a post hole beside the road, and inside the wall. There was a turf bank here and the work of excavating was comparatively easy.

While the quartette of boys were thus engaged an automobile came into view from down the road. It approached swiftly, and Wiley Moyle suddenly recognized it.

“See who has come!” he scoffed. “Here’s Burton Poole’s buzz-wagon with Captain Chance at the wheel. Chance is going to win the gold cup, he says, and he and Poole are in partnership with that old lumber wagon.”

Chanceford Avery, who was considerable older than most of the club members, was a dark complexioned, sharp featured young man, not much liked by the boys of Riverdale, but who made himself agreeable to most of the girl members of the Outing Club.

Some months before he had shown his enmity to the Speedwells, and he never let an opportunity escape for being unpleasant to the brothers. When he saw what the boys were about beside the road, he brought the automobile to an abrupt halt.

"Haven't you got a cheek to dig that bank up in that manner, Speedwell?" he said. "You'll get into trouble."

"Guess not," returned Dan, cheerfully. "It never entered my head we'd have to get a permit to set a post down here, as long as we are going to take the post right up again and fill in the hole. I've saved the sod whole, too."

"At any rate, there's one thing sure," snapped Billy, who didn't like young Avery at all, any more than he did Francis Avery, Chanceford's brother, and the superintendent of the Darringford shops; "we haven't got to come to *you* for a permit."

"Aw, stop your rowing, you fellows," advised Burton Poole, who was a good-natured, easy-going chap. "What are you going to do, Dan?"

Dan explained briefly, still keeping on with his work.

"You'll have a fat time trying to get that old hulk of a car up here," sneered Chance Avery. "And after you get it up, what good is it?"

"That we'll see about later," returned the older Speedwell, rather gruffly.

"Max Solomons made a fool of you," declared Chance. "He is blowing around town how he got the best of you fellows. Why, the car wasn't good for much when it got pitched over the bank."

"You'd laugh the other side of your mouth if this old car ever beat you and Poole, wouldn't you now?" demanded Billy.

"I suppose you fellows intend entering with it in the thousand mile endurance run?" laughed Chance.

"Bet your life we are!" cried Billy, before his brother could stop him.

"Listen to that, will you, you fellows?" said Chance. "These Speedwells are the limit!"

"We've been able to beat you before now, Chanceford Avery," snapped Billy. "Now go along! Nobody wants you here."

Chance might have stopped longer to argue the point, but Burton, who was all for peace, urged him on. Their car, which was really a very good one, hummed away toward town. Inside of twenty minutes a carriage rattled down to the place where the boys were at work.

"Hey, you, Dan Speedwell!" exclaimed an unpleasant voice, and Dan looked up from settling the big timber in the ground to see Josiah Somes, the Riverdale constable.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Somes," returned the youth. "Haven't caught those robbers in the maroon car yet, have you?"

The other boys laughed. Josiah's ability as a detective was a joke about town.

"Well, them other fellers haven't caught the scoundrels, either," snarled Somes. "I guess there ain't no medals on Polk, if he *is* a deputy!"

"Wish you luck," said Dan, good naturedly.

"Never you mind about them bank robbers. I ain't here looking for them," said the constable. "I want *you*."

"What!" cried Dan. "Are you going to arrest me again, Mr. Somes?"

"I want to know who gave you permission to dig that hole, and clutter up this place with them contraptions."

Dan and Billy looked meaningfully at each other. Both boys knew at once that Chance Avery had set Josiah Somes after them – and the constable was only too willing to do them an ill turn.

"Come on!" the man snarled. "Hop into my buggy, Dan Speedwell. I'm going to take you before the 'Squire and see what he's got to say about this."

CHAPTER VII

THE HAND IN THE DARK

The three other boys were not a little alarmed by the constable's word and manner; but Dan did not show any fear.

"Just pack the earth and stones well around the post, Billy," he said to his brother, cheerfully, "while I go back to town with Mr. Some, and get this matter straightened out."

Dan knew a little something himself about the town ordinances; he was aware that a permit was necessary for the opening of an excavation in a public road. But it was a rule often ignored in such small matters as this. Chance Avery had set the officious constable at this work, and Some was just mean enough to delight in making the Speedwells trouble.

And on the way to the house of 'Squire English they would pass the office of the council clerk. Dan knew this gentlemen very well, and as Some pulled up his horse to speak to a friend, the boy hopped out upon the sidewalk.

"Hey! where you going?" demanded the constable.

"I'll be right back," said Dan, dodging into the building and leaving the constable fussing in the carriage.

The boy found Mr. Parker at his desk and explained quickly what he and Billy were doing down there beside the river road.

"Digging a hole to set a post? Well, go ahead! I reckon nobody will object," said the clerk. "You'll fill it in all right, Dan?"

"But somebody *has* objected," explained the boy. And he told Mr. Parker of the difficulty.

"Pshaw! Josiah ought to be in better business," declared the clerk, and he hastily filled out a permit, headed "Highway Department" and gave it to the youth. "Show that to Justice English," he advised.

He nodded and smiled and Dan knew that the gentleman appreciated the joke on the constable. The latter was sputtering loudly when Dan returned to the sidewalk. He had got out of the carriage and hitched his horse.

"Here! you come along with me, Dan Speedwell!" cried the constable. "You're trying to run away."

Dan saw Chance Avery grinning widely on the other side of the square. It was plain that the captain of the Riverdale Club congratulated himself that he had got the Speedwells into trouble.

They went into 'Squire English's office. The old gentleman was a crotchety man, stern and brusque of speech, and a terror to the evil-doers who came before him. He did not like boys, having forgotten that he was ever one himself.

"What now? What now, Josiah?" he snapped, looking up from his papers, and glaring under bristling brows at Dan Speedwell.

"This here boy – and some others that I didn't bring in – are digging holes in the turf along the river road, just beyond Mr. Abram Sudds' place. You know that piece of turf there, 'Squire, that the town spent so much to grade and make handsome. Well this here Dan Speedwell was digging a hole in it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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