

Goldfrap John Henry

The Boy Scouts On The Range



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CHAPTER I.

ROB SURPRISES A COW-PUNCHER

Northward from Truxton, Arizona, the desert stretches a red-hot, sandy arm, the elbow of which crooks about several arid ranges of baked hills clothed with a scanty growth of chaparral. Across this sun-bitten solitude of sand and sage brush extend two parallel steel lines – the branch of the Southern Pacific which at Truxton takes a bold plunge into the white solitudes of the dry country.

Scattered few and far between on the monotonous level are desert towns, overtopped by lofty water tanks, perched on steel towers, in the place of trees, and sun-baked like everything else in the "great sandy." These isolated communities, the railroad serves. Twice a day, with the deliberate pace of the Gila Monster, a dusty train of three cars, drawn by a locomotive of obsolete pattern, – which has been not inaptly compared to a tailor's goose with a fire in it – makes its slow way.

Rumbling through a gloomy, rock-walled cut traversing the barren range of the Sierra Tortilla, the railroad emerges – after much bumping through scorched foothills and rattling over straddle-legged trestles above dry arroyos – at Mesaville. Mesaville stands on the south bank of the San Pedro, a scanty branch of the Gila River. To the south of this little desert community, across the quivering stretches of glaring sand and mesquite, there hangs always a blue cloud – the Santa Catapina Range.

The blazing noonday sun lay smitingly over Mesaville and the inhabitants of that town, when on a September day the dust-powdered train before referred to drew up groaningly at the depot, and from one of its forward cars there emerged three boys of a type strange to the primitive settlement.

The eldest of the three, a boy of about seventeen, whom his two friends addressed as Rob, was Rob Blake, whom readers of the Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol – the first volume of this series – have met before. His companions were Corporal Merritt Crawford of the same patrol, and the rotund Tubby Hopkins, the son of widow Hopkins of Hampton, Long Island, from which village all three, in fact, came.

"Well, here we are at Mesaville."

Rob Blake gazed across the hot tracks at the row of raw buildings opposite as he spoke, and the town gazed back in frank curiosity at him. Opposite the depot was a small hotel, on the porch of which several figures had been seated with their chairs tilted back, and their feet on the rail, as the train rolled in.

As it pulled out again, leaving the boys and an imposing pile of baggage exposed to the view of the Mesavillians, six pairs of feet were removed from the porch-rails as if by machinery, and their several owners bent forward in a frank stare at the newcomers.

"Must think a circus has come to town," commented Tubby.

"Well, they know where to look for the elephant," teased Merritt mischievously.

"And for the laughing hyena, too, I guess," parried the fat youth, as the corporal went off into a paroxysm of suddenly checked laughter.

The boys had bought sombreros at Truxton, and in their baggage was clothing of the kind which Harry Harkness – at whose invitation they had come to this part of the country – had advised them to buy. But as they still wore their light summer suits of Eastern cut and make, their generally "different" look from the members of the Mesaville Hotel Loungers' Association was quite sufficient to excite the attention of the latter.

Readers of the Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol will recall that in that book was related the formation of the patrol at Hampton Harbor, L. I., and how it had been effected. How the boys of the patrol had many opportunities to show that they were true scouts was also told. Notably was this so in the incident of the stolen uniforms, in which the boys' enemies, Jack Curtiss, Bill Bender and Hank Handcraft, a disreputable old town character, were implicated.

It will also be remembered that while encamped on an island near their home village, the Boy Scouts put off in a motor dory to the rescue of a stranded cattle ship on which Mr. Harkness, a cattle rancher, and his son Harry, a lad of the boys' own age, were returning from London, whither they had just taken a big consignment of stock. In return for their services, including the summoning of aid by wireless, Mr. Harkness invited the boys to spend some time on his cattle range. What adventurous boys would not have leaped at the invitation? But for a time it appeared as if it would be impossible for Rob and his chums to accept it, owing to the fact that the Hampton Academy, which they all attended, resumed its school term early in the fall.

Just at this time, however, something happened which was very welcome to all three of the Scouts. Serious defects had been discovered in the foundation of the Academy, and it had been decided that it would be unsafe for the scholars to reassemble till these had been remedied. It was estimated that the work would take two months or more. Thus it had come about that the invitation of Mr. Harkness was accepted. To the boys' regret, however, only the members of the Patrol who stood that day on the platform at Mesaville had been able to obtain the consent of their parents to take the long, and to Eastern eyes, hazardous, trip.

Arrangements had been made by letter for Harry Harkness, the rancher's son, to meet the boys at Mesaville, but the train had rolled in and rolled out again without his putting in an appearance.

"Maybe Harry fell in that river and was drowned," suggested Tubby, pointing ahead down the tracks to the trestle crossing the San Pedro River. At this time of the year the so-called river was a mere trickle of mud-colored water, threading its way between high, sandy banks. The boys burst into a laugh at the idea of any one's drowning in it.

"He'll be here before long," said Rob confidently. "It's a drive of more than fifty miles to the ranch, remember, and we can't start out till to-morrow morning, anyhow."

Just then a white-aproned Chinaman appeared on the porch of the hotel and vigorously rang a bell. At the signal the lounging cow-punchers and plainsmen rose languidly from their chairs and bolted into the dining-room. From the few stores also appeared the merchants of Mesaville, most of whom lived at the hotel.

"Sounds like dinner," remarked Tubby hopefully, sniffing the air on which an odor of food was wafted across the tracks. "Smells like it, too."

"Trust Tubby to detect grub," laughed Rob.

"He's a culinary Sherlock Holmes," declared Merritt, but his remark was made to Rob alone, for Tubby was beyond the reach of his sarcasm. He had started at once to cross the tracks and find the dining-room.

"I guess it wouldn't be a bad idea to have something to eat while we're waiting," said Rob. "Let's go over."

Tubby was already installed in a seat at the long table when his chums entered. He had in front of him a plate of soup, on the top of which floated a sort of upper crust of grease. From time to time an investigating fly ventured too near the edge and was miserably drowned. It was Tubby's initiation into desert hotel life, and he didn't look as if he was enjoying it.

On both sides of the table, however, the cow-punchers, teamsters, and Mesaville commercial lights, were shoveling away their food without the flicker of an eyelash. Opposite to Tubby were seated two young fellows in cowboy garb, who seemed to extract much noisy amusement from watching the stout youth eat. They didn't seem to care if he overheard their somewhat personal remarks.

"Ah, there's a lad who'll be a help to his folks when he grows up," grinned one of the stout boy's tormentors, as Rob and Merritt took their seats.

"Which will be before you do," placidly murmured Tubby, continuing to eat his soup.

A shout of laughter went up at this, and it wasn't at Tubby's expense, either.

The two youths who had been so anxious to display their wit reddened, and one of them angrily said something about "the fresh tenderfoot."

"Here's two more of 'em," tittered the other, as Merritt and Rob came in. Rob wore on his breast, but pinned on his waistcoat and out of sight, the Red Honor for lifesaving, which had been presented to him for heroism at the time of the waterlogging of the hydroplane, as narrated in the Boy Scouts of the Eagle Patrol. Merritt also wore the decoration in the same inconspicuous place.

As the leader of the Eagle Patrol sat down, however, his coat caught against Tubby's shoulder and was thrown back, exposing the decoration.

"Oh! ho! Look at the tenderfoot's medal," chuckled one of the young cattlemen; "wonder what it's for?"

"The championship of the bread and milk eaters of New York State, I reckon," grinned the other, and another shout of laughter bore witness to the table's approval of this primitive humor.

Rob flushed angrily, but said nothing. He did not wish to stir up trouble with two such ill-mannered young boors as the cattle-punchers were showing themselves to be. Encouraged by his silence, the badgering went on. One by one the other guests had been served by the Chinese attendant, with raisin pie and half-melted cheese, and had arisen and left the room. The two young cow-punchers and the Boy Scouts were shortly left alone in the fly-infested apartment. Rob and Merritt, who found the surroundings little to their liking, hurried through their meal, but Tubby ate conscientiously through everything that was brought him.

It now grew plain, even if it had not been so before, that the two sun-burned young plainsmen sitting opposite the boys were deliberately trying to aggravate them.

Interpreting the boys' silence as fear, they grew bolder and bolder in their remarks.

"Have to catch up a real cow, I reckon," dreamily went on one of the boys' tormentors, gazing at the ceiling abstractedly, but fingering the condensed milk can.

"What for?" inquired the other, playing into his hand.

"Why, the tin cow might disagree with mama's boys."

"Ho-ho-ho! Say, Clark."

"What, Jess?"

"Reckon they must be overstocked with yearlings East."

"Looks that way. Do you suppose Easterners are born or jest grow?"

The youth addressed by his companion as Jess looked straight at Rob as he spoke, and the insult was unmistakable. Rob's self-control suddenly deserted him with a rush.

"I'll answer for your friend," he snapped out. "They grow-and-they-grow-right."

Tubby looked up in surprise from his raisin pie, and Merritt's eyes opened wide at Rob's tone. It foreboded trouble as sure as a hurricane signal foretells a storm.

"My! my!" grinned Jess, but it was an uncomfortable sort of a grin, "hear the little boy with the medal talk. Come on, Clark, let's go see to the ponies while the tenderfeet wait for their nurse to come and take their bibs off."

They rose from the table, but Rob, still inwardly raging but outwardly cool as ice, stopped them.

"Say," he said, "are you fellows cattlemen?"

"You bet, stranger, from the ground up," rejoined Clark, with a vast air of self-importance.

"Well, then we've been misinformed in the East," said Rob, coolly brushing a few stray crumbs from his knees.

"How's that?"

"Why, we'd been told that cattlemen were natural gentlemen; but whoever told us that was dead wrong. Judging by you fellows, they're not natural, and certainly not the other thing."

Clark's face grew crimson and he muttered something about "fixing the fresh kid," but his companion drew him away.

"We'll have plenty of time to rope and brand these young mavericks," he said, as they left the room.

As they vanished Rob burst into a shout of laughter.

"Score one for the Boy Scouts," he said. "If ever there were two discomfited cow-punchers, those fellows are it."

The landlord, who had entered the room a few moments before, came forward as the boys arose from the table. He was a tall, lanky man, with a look of perpetual gloom on his face. A drooping, straw-colored mustache did not help to enliven his funereal features.

"Say, strangers," he said, in a dismal voice, "you've started in bad."

"How's that?" inquired Rob, in a somewhat peppery tone.

"Why, riling up Clark Jennings and Jess Randell; they's two of the toughest boys in the country."

"Think so, I guess," snorted Tubby.

"Well, wait and see," said the landlord, with a melancholy shrug of his sloping shoulders. "Three dinners, please."

He extended a yellow palm.

"How much?" asked Rob, putting his hand in his pocket.

"Three dollars and six bits."

"What! three dollars and seventy-five cents for that fly-ridden stuff?"

"That's the charge, stranger."

Rob, seeing there was no use arguing, paid over the money, in exchange for which they had received three greasy plates of soup, three portions of ragged, overdone bull beef, and three slabs of raisin pie, together with three cups of muddy, inky coffee. But a sudden impulse of curiosity gripped him.

"Say, what's the twenty-five cents extra all round for?" he asked.

"Fer your ponies," rejoined the landlord, more miserably than ever. He seemed to be on the point of bursting into tears.

"Ponies!" gasped Rob. "We haven't got any."

"Never mind, it's a rule of the house," said the landlord, as if that settled the matter; "and if you ain't got any ponies it ain't my fault, is it?"

There was no answering this sort of logic, and the boys strolled out to the porch to see if they could sight any trace of Harry Harkness. There was no sign of him, however, and after a prolonged period of gazing across the blazing desert, the boys sank back in three of the big rockers that stood in a row on the porch. It was dull, sitting there in the intense heat and drowsy silence, broken only at long intervals by the clatter of a pony's hoofs as some cow-puncher ambled by at an easy lope. A loud snore from Tubby soon proclaimed that he was off, and Merritt and Rob were about to follow him into the land of dreams, when there came a sudden interruption.

Rob felt his shoulder roughly seized from behind, and a harsh, mandatory voice addressed him:

"Say, that's my chair you're sitting in. You'll have to get out."

The boy turned and saw Clark Jennings glaring at him. Close beside him, with a grin on his face, was Jess Randell.

"Even supposing it is your chair," said Rob, "you can ask me for it like a gentleman, – then," he added to himself, "I'll think over giving it to you."

"Oh, I guess you think you're a mighty fine gentleman?"

"I hope I am one, yes."

"Well, out here gentlemen have to fight for their title. Are you going to give me that chair?"

"As you are no more a guest of this hotel than I am, I shall sit here till I get ready to get up."

"Then I'll have to help you out – Ouch!"

The remark and the exclamation came close together. Clark Jennings had bent forward as he spoke, and roughly laid hold of Rob to pull him from the chair by main force. As he did so, however, Rob had suddenly changed from a passive, rather sleepy boy, to a bundle of steel springs full of fight. Clark Jennings, as he laid hold of Rob, had felt himself hurled backward. Unable to check his impetus, he had landed against the wall of the hotel with a force which caused him to give vent to the exclamation recorded.

"Look out, tenderfoot, he'll kill yer," warned the melancholy landlord from the window of the office, where he had been entering in a greasy book the extortion practiced on the boys.

Several cow-punchers awoke to interest at the same time as Tubby and Merritt began to realize what was happening.

His eyes blazing with fury, Clark Jennings crouched low, and then reaching back drew a revolver from his hip. He aimed it full at Rob, but simultaneously a strange thing happened. Rob was seen to dart forward, diving right under the leveled pistol. The next instant the weapon was spinning through the air. It landed with a thump in the middle of the dusty road. But Clark Jennings didn't see it, for the excellent reason that at that precise moment he was lying flat on his back on the hotel veranda. Before his eyes swam a whole galaxy of constellations. Over him stood Rob, with flushed face and clinched fists.

CHAPTER II. NEWS OF THE MOQUIS

"Wow!" yelled the onlookers, as Clark's body struck the floor with a resounding thwack.

Jess was in an agony of excitement over the sudden downfall of his friend. He was just about to hurl himself upon Rob when a sudden detaining arm fell on his with a heavy pressure.

"Hold on there. We want fair play."

It was Merritt Crawford who spoke, and Jess sullenly dropped his belligerent look. Somehow, the happenings of the last few seconds had altered the aspect of the tenderfeet materially in the eyes of the two young cow-punchers.

"I'll fix you," growled Clark furiously, scrambling to his feet.

"Why did you let him get up?" asked Tubby, his round cheeks glowing with excitement.

"Because I want to give him plenty of rope," said Rob, a grim look creeping over his usually pleasant face.

A sudden furious onrush on the part of Clark prohibited further conversation.

"Go in and eat him up, Clark!" shouted a lanky, long-legged cow-puncher, one of several who had been attracted by the rumpus.

"Looks as if your friend had developed a sudden attack of indigestion," grinned Tubby delightedly, as Rob's fist collided with the advancing Clark's jaw, much to the latter's astonishment.

"Never seed nothing like it," commented the landlord, somewhat less melancholy now. "Clark's the champeen round here."

"He may be when he's got a gun to back him up, but not when he has to fall back on his fists," retorted Merritt.

"Look out!" he yelled suddenly, as the young cow-puncher, finding that fair methods seemed to have failed, attempted a foul blow below Rob's belt.

But there was no need of the warning. Rob had seen the blow coming halfway, swiftly delivered as it was. The cowardly attempt at foul tactics thoroughly enraged him.

"I thought Westerners fought fair," he gritted out, gripping the astonished cow-puncher by the wrist of the offending hand. Before Clark could gasp his astonishment, his other wrist was captive.

Then a strange thing happened. Before any one had time to realize just how it occurred, Clark's body was describing a sweeping arc in the air. His heels rushed through the atmosphere fully five feet from the floor. Like the lash of a whip, his powerless body was straightened out as he reached the limit of the aerial curve he had described. At the same instant a dismayed yell broke from his pallid lips as Rob let go.

Over the veranda rail, and out into the dusty road the young cow-puncher followed his revolver. He landed in a heap in the white dust, while Rob yelled triumphantly:

"Now pick up your gun and profit by the lesson in manners I've given you."

So saying, the boy calmly seated himself once more in the disputed chair, only a slight, quick movement of his chest betraying the great physical effort he had been through. After all, surprising as it had seemed, there was nothing very amazing about Rob's achievement. At the Hampton Academy athletics had always been a boast. The trick Rob had just put into execution he had learned from his physical instructor, who in his turn had picked it up from a Samurai wrestler of Japan. But to the cowboys, and other loungers about the Mesaville Hotel, the feat had been little short of marvelous.

They eagerly thronged about the boy as he took his seat once more, and this time he remained in undisputed possession of it.

"Whip-sawed, that's what Clark was," exclaimed one of the group.

Another, the same tall, lanky fellow who had just been urging the young cow-puncher on to what he thought would be an easy victory, approached Rob.

"Say, stranger," he asked eagerly, "will you teach me that thar contraption?"

"Couldn't do it," rejoined Rob soberly, although a smile played about the corners of his lips.

"Why not?"

"Because, then, you'd know as much as I do," responded Rob. The assemblage burst into a loud roar of laughter, in which you may be sure, however, there were two voices which did not join. Those two were Clark Jennings' and Jess Randell's. The former had just picked himself up and stuffed his gun in his pistol pocket. A malevolent scowl marked his face as he did so. Nor did Jess smooth over matters by remarking audibly:

"Say, Clark, what was the matter with you?"

"Chilled feet, I guess," chortled Tubby, who had overheard the remark.

"Get away from me, can't you?" snarled Clark irritably, facing round on his well-meaning crony, "why didn't you help me out?"

"Help you out – how?"

"Why, trip that tenderfoot up when I rushed him."

"Oh, shucks, I thought you fought fair," said Jess, a little disgusted in spite of himself.

"So I do," snorted Clark, "when I'm winning."

"Well, come on round and see to the ponies. We'll think up some way to get even with these grain-fed mavericks before very long," comforted Jess.

"You bet, and in a way they won't forget, either," Clark Jennings promised himself, as he followed his companion to the corral.

Not long after this, the boys perceived, far out on the sultry plain, a sudden swirl of dust.

"Something coming," shouted Tubby, who, strange to say, had been the first to notice the approaching column of dust.

"Team," briefly grunted the landlord, "did I hear you fellers say you was waiting for some one from the Harkness range?"

"Yes, you did," said Rob.

"Waal, I guess that's them now. Must have a bear-cat of a team in to kick up all that smother."

Closer and closer grew the dust cloud, and presently, from its yellow swirls, emerged the heads of the leaders of an eight-mule team. Behind them lumbered a big, broad-tired wagon, from the bed of which a high seat was reared like a watch tower. By the driver's side was a long iron foot brake. As the team approached the bank of the sandy little dried-up river, where the road took a dip, the driver placed his foot on the brake and a loud screeching and groaning resulted, as the big wagon, with the hind wheels locked, slid down the far bank. As the front wheels thundered across the rough bridge above the thin thread of luke-warm water, the heads of the first mules emerged over the top of the bank nearest the hotel.

"Mountain style," commented the long, lanky cow-puncher admiringly, as the driver, a tall, sun-burned lad of about Rob's age, whirled a long whip three or four times round his head and concluded the flourish with a loud "crack" as sharp and penetrating as a pistol shot.

An instant later the heavy wagon and its eight, dust-choked, sweating mules swept up in front of the hotel porch. The driver, flinging the single line with which he drove to his companion, clambered from his lofty perch and was immediately surrounded by the three tenderfeet.

"Well, you certainly come into town with a flourish of trumpets," laughed Rob, after the first salutations between the Eastern boys and Harry Harkness, the rancher's son, had been exchanged.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting so long," responded the other, who in order to speak had pulled down a big red handkerchief which had bundled up the lower part of his face and kept it dust-proof while he drove; "but the fact is, we had some trouble on the way. A bunch of Moquis are out, and – "

"Indians!" gasped Tubby, with round eyes.

"Yes, regular Indians," laughed Harry; "the Moquis' reservation is off a hundred miles or more to the northwest, near Fort Miles, but – "

"They're off the reservation," cut in Tubby, proud of his knowledge.

"Out fer a snake dance, I reckon," put in the long, lanky cow-puncher, who had been an interested listener.

"Why, hello, Lone Star," exclaimed Harry. "I didn't know you were in town. Yes," he went on, "there's a secret valley in the Santa Catapinas which has been used by them for centuries for their festivals, and although they are supposed to be kept within the limits of the reservation, every once in a while a bunch of them get over here and hold a snake dance."

"I've read about them," said Rob; "they do all kinds of weird things with rattlesnakes, don't they?"

"Well, no white man has ever seen them – or, if he has, never lived to tell about it," said Harry, "so of course nobody knows exactly what they do. But anyhow, when we camped last night we had eight mules, and when we woke this morning there were only six. Jose, there – hey, Jose, wake up!" He prodded the Mexican who still sat on the wagon seat, with the end of his long whip. "Well, as I was saying, Jose trailed them and found them tethered in a arroyo about a mile from camp."

"The Indians took them?" asked Merritt.

"Yes, Jose, who's as good a trailer as he is a sleeper, found unmistakable tracks of Moquis. I suppose they took the mules in the night and then got scared at something and hitched them in the arroyo, meaning to come back for them."

"Whereabouts did the Injuns cut into you, Harry?"

A new voice had broken into the conversation. That of Clark Jennings. He nursed above his right eye a rapidly swelling "goose egg," marking the spot at which he had collided with the roadway. At his elbow was the faithful Jess Randell.

"Why, hello, Clark, you in town, too? Every one from the Santa Catapinas seems to be in to-day – you, too, Jess. Well, the Indians paid us their little call just this side of the Salt Licks, – why?"

"Oh, jes' wanted to know. Me and Jess has got to ride home that way to-night, for it's better riding when it's cool; and I thought I'd like to know whar to expect the varmints."

"Well, that's the best information I can give you," said Harry, "but what have you been doing to your eye?"

"Oh, nothing," muttered Clark, turning away, while a loud guffaw went up.

"What's all the joke, – what is it?" asked Harry. It was soon explained, and the young rancher burst into a laugh.

"Say, Rob, you must mean to clean the country of bad men. Trimmed Clark Jennings! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Has he much of a reputation?" inquired Rob innocently, but with a twinkle in his eye.

"I should say so. He won't forgive you in a hurry. He's going to be your neighbor, too, for a while."

"How's that?"

"His father owns the next ranch to us. Jess Randell is Clark's cousin, an orphan, you know. He lives there, too. The two are great cronies, and think a lot of their reputation as tough citizens. The whole bunch have a bad name."

As the team from the Harkness ranch was tired out by the long, hard journey across the hot desert, it was decided that the boys should spend the night at the Mesaville House, and start for the ranch the next morning while it was cool. This would bring them into the mountains by dusk. Over supper they laughed and talked merrily, recalling the last time they had met, which was in a wet, dripping fog off the Long Island coast. How differently were they now situated!

After the meal Merritt and Harry sat down to a game of checkers, while Tubby, seated in a big chair, indulged in his favorite occupation – namely, taking a quiet doze. As for Rob, he wandered

about the little town a while, but found nothing to interest him. Small as Mesaville was in common with most towns of the same character, it boasted several low dens in which the cow-punchers, miners and sheepmen gambled and drank their hard-earned money away. From these dens, as usual, there came the same blasts of foolish talk and loud laughter, as their swing doors opened and closed. A glare of light poured from their blazing interiors to the quiet, moonlit desert outside.

As Rob, rather sickened, turned away from this section of the town, the doors of one of the places swung open, and the forms of Clark Jennings and his crony, Jess, emerged; with them was a third figure, that of a tall, stoop-shouldered young man. The eyes of all three fell simultaneously on the figure of Rob as he walked away.

"Talk of the train and you hear her whistle," grinned Jess. "There he is now."

The companion of the two young cow-punchers nodded.

"That's him, all right. I recognize him. It'll be candy to me to get even with him."

"We can trust you, Jack?"

"I'll fix him, never fear."

"All right, then, we're going to start. We'll ride into town ag'in in a few days and fix you up."

"All right. I need the money. How's Bill and Hank making out?"

"Oh, doing odd jobs around the ranch. You know, Cousin Bill has turned out to be quite a cow-puncher; guess he rode horses back East?"

"Yes, his father owned some in Hampton," rejoined the stoop-shouldered young man. (It will be recalled that when Bill Bender left Hampton he spoke of stopping a while with relatives in the West.)

After a little more talk, the three bade each other good night. Soon the clatter of two ponies' hoofs, growing fainter and fainter in the distance, marked the departure from town of Clark Jennings and his crony. In the meantime, Rob had looked into the hotel, and finding Harry and Merritt still engrossed in a hotly contested fifth game, and Tubby snoring contentedly, had set out on another stroll. This time his aimless footsteps took him in the direction of the desert. By the railroad bridge he paused, gazing down at the moonlit water. Where the bridge abutments projected, the thready current of the San Pedro collected and formed quite a deep pool.

"If this was the East, there'd be fish in there," mused Rob, when suddenly behind him he thought he heard a furtive footfall. He turned quickly. But, even as he did so, an irresistible shove was given him. Blindly extending his arms, Rob plunged forward down the steep embankment.

CHAPTER III. THE DESERT WATER HOLE

As Rob toppled forward into vacancy, he received a startling momentary impression of familiarity from the tones of a loud laugh which rang out behind him. Fortunately for him, the water at the foot of the bridge abutment was some six or seven feet deep, and he struck it spread-eagle fashion, so that beyond the shock of his sudden fall he was uninjured. He at once struck out for the bank. When he stood again on the dry ground, shaking the water from himself, he began to rack his memory for the recollection of where and when he had heard a similar laugh to the one that had sounded in his ears as he plunged forward into space. Try as he would, however, he could not place it, and giving up the attempt finally, he made his way back to the hotel.

The checker players started up as the dripping figure of the Boy Scout leader entered the room, and naturally began to ply him with questions. Rob's story of the events of the preceding few minutes was soon told, but so far as the shedding of any light on the mystery was concerned, it remained as blank a puzzle as ever.

"I'd like to think that I dreamed it all," said Rob, "but these" – wringing out his wet clothes – "won't let me."

"Well, there's no doubt that you were shoved over intentionally," decided Harry Harkness, "but who is there out here who would do such a thing?"

"It might have been one of those two cow-punchers you had the row with this afternoon," suggested Merritt.

"No. I saw Clark and Jess ride out of town a good half-hour before Rob could have been shoved over," said Harry.

"Maybe they mistook me for some one else," suggested Rob, as the easiest way of disposing of the matter. Privately, though, he entertained a different opinion. If he could only place that laugh! But try as he would, he could not for the life of him recall where he had heard it before.

Soon afterward the Boy Scouts and their ranch friend retired to bed, Tubby having been sufficiently aroused to make his way upstairs to their room. Tired out as Rob was, he sank into a deep sleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. With Tubby things were different, however. His nap in the chair had rendered him wakeful, and he tossed and turned till almost midnight before he began to grow drowsy. Just as he was dropping off, two persons entered the adjoining room. The partitions, as is usual in the West, were of the very thinnest wood, and he could easily hear every movement made by their neighbors.

"Well, Jack," said one of the voices, evidently resuming a conversation that had been begun some time previously, "so you did the kid up, eh?"

"Yes, sent him head first over the bank. Wish he'd broken his neck. The kid is one of that bunch that was responsible for my leaving Hampton."

"Is that so? I don't wonder you are sore at him. Why didn't you hit him a good crack on the head while you were about it?"

"Oh, I figured that a cold bath would do as a starter. Wait till that bunch gets up to the mountains. Clark and Jess and my friends, Bender and Handcraft, will attend to them."

Tubby's brain was in a whirl. He had had no difficulty in recalling one of the voices, – that of the one who had spoken of sending Rob over the bank of the San Pedro. Who the other was he couldn't imagine, however, except that he was evidently a crony of the first speaker. Impulsively the stout youth shook Rob's shoulder, and as the other opened his eyes, enjoined him to silence.

"Say, Rob, who do you think is in the next room?" he gasped.

"I don't know, I'm sure. The emperor of China?" asked Rob in a sleepy voice.

"Hush! don't talk so loud. It's Jack Curtiss!"

"What!"

"It is. I'm sure of it. He was boasting about having shoved you over the bank of the river."

"Whatever can he be doing out here?"

"Living on the allowance his father sends him, I suppose. I heard before we left Hampton that he was some place in the West. I guess his father would soon stop his allowance if he knew he was up to his old tricks. Mr. Curtiss thinks that Jack is studying farming."

"Raising a crop of mischief, I guess," breathed Rob, in the same cautious undertone that the two boys had used throughout their conversation. "I wonder if Bill Bender and Hank Handcraft are with him?"

"That reminds me. I heard him mention them. They are on some ranch up in the mountains – where we are going, I gathered."

"That means trouble ahead," mused Rob.

"Are you going to have Jack arrested?"

"No, how can I prove that it was he who shoved me in? Just overhearing a conversation is no proof. I know now, though, why that laugh I heard sounded so familiar."

Both boys listened for some time, but they heard no further talk from Jack Curtiss and his companion regarding themselves. Their talk seemed to be about money matters, and as well as they could gather, Jack was in debt to some gamblers for a large sum which he despaired of raising.

"I've only got a month to get it in," they heard him say.

"Well, we'll hit upon a plan, never fear," rejoined his companion.

The next morning Harry Harkness was told of the happenings of the night. He, of course, already knew of the bold attempt of the former bully of Hampton Academy to kidnap one of the Boy Scouts, as related in the first volume of this series, and was inclined to warn the boys to be careful of such a dangerous character. Viewed in the cheerful light of the early day, however, the boys did not regard the matter so seriously. Indeed, they forgot all about Jack and his threats in the bustle of preparation for their long trip across the waste lands.

Breakfast was soon disposed of, and then the boys in a body made for the corral. Jose had been told two hours earlier to catch up and hitch the mules, but the long-eared animals were still browsing at the hay pile, and not a vestige of Jose was to be seen when the boys emerged.

"There he is in the hay," shouted Rob suddenly, pointing to two long, thin legs sticking out of the fodder heap.

"Asleep again, the rascal," exclaimed Harry. "Come on, Rob; you lay hold of one leg, and I'll take the other."

Both boys seized hold of a designated limb, and soon the sleepy Jose, expostulating loudly, was hauled out into the sunlight.

"Why aren't those mules hitched?" demanded Harry.

"Me go sleep," grinned the Mexican teamster apologetically, showing a row of white teeth.

"We don't need telling that. You are always asleep, except when you're eating. Get busy now and hitch up."

Urged thus, Jose soon had his rawhide rope circling, and in ten minutes had caught up the team with far more agility and skill than would have been suspected in such an easy-going individual.

The mules were soon attached to the heavy wagon and the single line which guided them threaded. This manner of driving was new to the boys, but they were soon to find that most teamsters in the far West use only a single rein attached to the lead mules on the right side. The others follow the leader. If the driver desires to turn his team to the left, instead of pulling the single line, he shouts, "Haugh!" and over swings the team.

The boys' baggage had lain at the depot all night, and accordingly the first stop was made there. It was soon loaded on, and then, with a loud cry of, "Ge-ee, Fox! Gee-ee-e, Maud!" from Jose, the

lead mules swung to the right. Over the bridge, beneath which Rob had met his misadventure of the night before, thundered the heavy vehicle. Swinging in a broad circle, they then headed toward the south, where the Santa Catapinas, blue and vague, were piled like clouds on the horizon.

Early as was the hour at which the start was made, however, two persons in Mesaville besides the hotel employees were up to see it. These were Jack Curtiss and the friend who had shared his room the night before. They peered out of the window at the four boys with eager glances.

"Look them over well, Emilio," Jack urged his companion, who in the daylight was seen to have a swarthy skin and the cigarette-stained fingers of a Mexican town lounge. Emilio Aguarrdo was a half-breed gambler, and a thoroughly vicious type of man. In him were combined the vices and evil passions of two races. His thin lips curled back from his yellow teeth as he watched the boys, who, with shouts and laughter, were loading up their belongings, while Jose slept on his lofty seat.

"I won't forget them, Jack," he promised, as the wagon started off, the long whip cracking like a gatling gun.

All that morning the wagon lumbered on across the hot plains, an occasional jack-rabbit or coyote being the only sign of life to be seen. As the sun grew higher, the boys saw in the far distance the strange sight of the town of Mesaville, hotel and all, hanging upside down above the horizon. It was a mirage, as clear and puzzling as these strange phenomena of the desert always are.

As the hours wore on, the mountains, from mere wavy outlines of blue, began to take on definite form. They now showed formidable, seamed and rugged. As well as the boys could perceive at that distance, the hills were covered with dark trees to their summits and intersected by dense masses of shadow, marking cañons and abysses. A more forbidding-looking range could hardly be imagined, yet in the foothills to the southeast there grew great savannas of succulent bunch grass on which several ranges of cattle roamed.

The noon camp was made in the foothills near a small depression in which grew some scanty grass of a dried-up, melancholy hue. The wagon road was at some little distance from this, and as soon as a halt was made, Jose, at Harry's orders, took a shovel from the wagon and started for the dip in the foothills.

"Going to dig potatoes?" asked Tubby casually, as he watched the lazy Mexican saunter off.

"No, water," responded Harry. His serious tone precluded any possibility that he was joking. But the idea of water in that sterile land seemed so ridiculous to the boys that they burst into a laugh.

"I mean it," declared Harry. "Here, you fellows, take those buckets from under the wagon. We carry them to water the mules. Pack them over to that dip and in half an hour you'll be back with them full."

"Huh! guess I could carry all the water that will come out of that place in one hand," commented the fat boy.

"Don't be rash," laughed Harry; "before long you'll take digging for water as a matter of course."

"Wish you could dig for ice-cream sodas," muttered the fat boy absently, picking up a bucket and starting off after Jose. Rob and Merritt followed, while Harry busied himself unhitching the mules for their noonday rest. This done, he lighted a fire of sage-brush roots, and awaited the return of the boys.

The first thing the boys saw Jose do when he got to the bottom of the dip was to lie flat on his stomach and place an ear to the ground.

"He's going to sleep again," suggested Merritt.

"Looks like it," agreed Rob.

But this time the Mexican did not drop off into a peaceful slumber. Instead, he presently straightened up, and shouldering his shovel, began tramping off once more. The boys followed him over several dips and rises till at last he descended into another depression in which grew some scanty herbage. Here he repeated the other performance and arose with a grunt of satisfaction. Suddenly he began digging furiously.

"Wow! he's making the dirt fly," exclaimed Tubby, as the industrious Mexican dug as frantically as though his life depended on it. So fast did the work of excavation proceed that soon quite a large hole had been made in the soft ground.

"Pity they haven't got him down at Panama," commented Merritt dryly.

Jose had paid no attention to the boys hitherto, but now he suddenly shouted, pointing downward into the hole: "Mira qui!"

"What's that about a key?" asked Tubby.

"Try to conceal your natural ignorance," rejoined Merritt, with withering scorn. "He said, 'Mira qui.' That means 'Look here.'"

"Oh, and 'latcha-key' means open the door, I suppose," retorted the stout youth. "You're a fine Spanish scholar, you are."

"I've a good mind to throw you into that hole," threatened Merritt.

"Try it," shouted the stout youth, hopping about aggravatingly.

"I will."

Merritt made a rush at the irritating Tubby, who leaped provokingly away. But suddenly he gave utterance to a yell of dismay, as in his efforts to retreat he stumbled into the hole which Jose had dug. By this time, to Rob's astonishment, for he had been watching Jose's methods with interest, quite a lot of muddy water had appeared, and into this accumulation of moisture the stout youth fell with a resounding splash.

Even the solemn Jose smiled as Tubby sputtered and splashed about in the pool.

"Come out of that water," commanded Merritt.

"Call this water?" demanded Tubby, sputtering some of it out of his mouth. "Ugh! it tastes more like soap suds to me."

"Him alkali," grinned Jose, as Tubby scrambled out and stood, rather crestfallen, on the verge of the magic pool; "mucho malo."

"What's 'mucho malo'?" demanded Tubby of Merritt, the self-appointed interpreter.

"It means you're a nuisance," retorted Merritt, which reply almost brought on a renewal of hostilities. Rob checked them, however, by reminding the stout youth that the water was for drinking and not for bathing purposes. The boys were anxious to dip their buckets in and return to the wagon, but Jose told them they must wait till the water cleared.

"Pretty soon him like glass," he said.

Sure enough, after a long interval of waiting, in which there was nothing to do but look at the sand and the burning blue sky above it, the previously muddy seepage water began to take on a green hue. With a yell, the boys rushed forward to dip it up.

But as they bent over the brink of the water hole a sudden shout from Jose made them look up. They echoed the Mexican's yell as they did so, for outlined against the sky was a startling figure.

It was that of an Indian, his sinewy limbs draped in a blanket of gorgeous hue, and astride of a thin, active-looking calico pony. For an instant the piercing eyes of the red man and the white boys met, and then, with a strange cry, he wheeled his pony and vanished over the rim of the depression.

"Was that an Indian?" gasped Tubby, for the figure of the red man had appeared and vanished so swiftly that it seemed almost as if it might have been a delusion.

"Moqui, very bad Indian," grunted the Mexican, who seemed nervous and fearful all of a sudden.

"Oh, I thought maybe it was a jack-in-the-box," said Tubby, with a cheerful grin, which froze on his face, however, as suddenly as it had come.

The rim of the water hole was surrounded by twenty or more wild figures, the companions of the solitary horseman. They had appeared as if by magic.

CHAPTER IV. SILVER TIP APPEARS

The interval of silence which succeeded to the discovery that they were surrounded by Moquis was the most trying any of the party had ever known. Resistance was useless, for each of the Indians carried a rifle of modern make, and even had the boys been armed, they could not have defended themselves.

"What do you want?" demanded Rob at length, of an Indian who, judging by his ornate feather headdress, seemed to be the chief of the party.

"White boys go to mountains?" demanded the chief.

"Yes. We are going to the Harkness ranch," rejoined Rob, a trifle more boldly, as there did not seem to be any active antagonism in the chief's tone.

"White boys got money?"

"It's a hold up!" gasped Tubby.

"Say, hold your tongue for once, can't you?" snapped Merritt angrily.

"Yes, we have some money. Why?" inquired Rob.

"We want um."

It was a direct demand, and as the boy hesitated, a grim look spread over the chief's face. Rob, like the others, carried most of his money in a belt about his waist, but each lad had a few bills in his wallet and some small change in his pockets.

"Say, what is this – Tag Day?" demanded Tubby, as the chief, having solemnly taken all Rob's small change, drew up in front of the stout youth and extended his dirty palm.

"All right," said the fat boy, hastily digging down into his pocket, as the red man stared steadily at him. "Here's all I've got. Take it, Chief What-you-may-call-um, and I hope whatever you get with it chokes you."

Fortunately for Tubby, the chief did not understand this, or it might have fared badly with the irrepressible youth. Merritt's turn came next, and then Jose, with many lamentations, surrendered a few small silver coins.

"All right. You go now," said the chief, as with a shrill, wild yell he dug his naked heels into his pony's sides, and the little beast plunged up the steep bank. Echoing his shrill cries, the other Indians joined him, and the body of marauders swept off across the foothills at a rapid pace.

"So that's the noble red man, is it?" demanded Tubby. "Hum! back home we'd call them noble panhandlers."

"What did they want the money for?" asked Rob of the Mexican, who was still wringing his hands over the loss of his pocket money.

"Moqui's go snake dance. Moocho red liquor," explained the guide from across the border.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Rob. As he spoke, his eyes fell suddenly on a small piece of paper the Indian chief had dropped when he rode up the steep side of the water hole. He picked it up and opened its folds carefully. It appeared to be a scrap torn from a notebook, and the boy stared as his eyes fell on the name "Clark Jennings, His Book."

"Say, fellows, look here," he cried excitedly, as he perused some writing on the other side. "That sneak I gave the razzle-dazzle to yesterday is in this."

"What, Clark Jennings?"

"The same. Listen!"

From the side of the paper which bore the writing Rob read as follows:

"They will be near the water hole at noon. All three have money."

"Well, what do you make of it?" asked Tubby in a puzzled tone. "I don't see the connection, quite."

"It's plain enough. I've heard that these Indians are placid enough if they are not interfered with and given money. That fellow Clark knew they were somewhere hereabouts – you remember he asked Harry about them yesterday. He and Jess Randell left Mesaville early, so as to meet them and bribe them to hold us up."

"But can the Indians read English writing?" asked Tubby.

"Yes. Most of the present generation have been to government schools and are comparatively well educated."

"Hooray for education!" shouted Tubby. "They sure are promising scholars."

There came a sudden shout from above.

"Hey, what's the matter with you fellows, anyhow? You've been gone almost an hour."

Harry Harkness stood at the edge of the dip, looking down at the excited boys.

"An hour isn't the only thing that's gone," wailed Tubby; "all our change has gone, too."

When the laugh at Tubby's whimsical way of putting it had subsided, the situation was explained to Harry, who agreed that there was nothing to be done.

"We had better be pushing on as fast as possible, though," he said; "there's no knowing when those fellows may wake up to the fact that we have more money about us and come back after it."

A hasty lunch was cooked and eaten, and the mules watered with a bucket of water each. This done, the team was once more hitched, and Jose, who had in the meantime dropped off to sleep again, awakened. But as the Mexican cracked his whip, and his long-eared charges began to move, a sudden surprise occurred. From a little dip ahead a horseman suddenly appeared and hailed the boys.

He was a tall, bearded man in regulation plainsman's costume, and his sun-burned face was shielded by a broad sombrero. On his face was a look of determination and self-reliance. As the boys looked at him they felt that here was a man of action and character.

"Hullo, strangers," he said, checking the splendid horse he rode, as the mules came to a stop. "Have you seen anything of any Moquis hereabout?"

"Why, yes," responded Rob; "they –"

"Saw us to the extent of all our small change," put in Tubby.

"Mine, too!" wailed the Mexican. "Mucho malo Indiano."

"What! you have been robbed by them?"

"Feels that way," said Tubby, patting his empty pockets.

"That's too bad," said the man. "I am Jeffries Mayberry, the Indian agent from the reservation. I am trying to round those fellows up without making a lot of trouble over it, and having the papers get hold of the story and print exaggerated accounts of an uprising. They are really harmless if they don't get hold of liquor."

"Or money," put in Tubby.

"Well, as far as we know, they swept off to the southeast," said Rob.

"Yes. They are going to have their snake dance in the Santa Catapinas. Every once in a while they break out and head for there. All the renegade Indian rascals for miles round join them, and besides the dance, which is a religious ceremony, they drink and gamble. Well, I must be getting on, and thank you for your information."

With a wave of his hat, he dug his big blunt-rowelled spurs into his horse's sides and was off in a cloud of dust.

"I'd like to help that fellow get his Indians rounded up," said Rob; "he seems the right sort of a chap."

"Yes, his name is well known around here," rejoined Harry, as the wagon moved onward once more. "He is the best Indian agent that the Moquis have ever had, my father says. He knows them,

and can handle them at all ordinary times. He dislikes fuss, however, and hates to see his name in the papers. Otherwise, I guess, he'd have had the soldiers after those fellows."

"I wish we had the Eagle Patrol out here," said Merritt. "We'd soon get after that bunch of redskins."

"Well, why not?" said Harry enigmatically.

"Why not what?"

"Why not form a patrol out here? You know we talked about it in the East in the brief time we had together."

"Say, that's a great idea," assented Rob.

"Who could we get to join, coyotes, rattlers, and jack-rabbits?" asked Tubby solemnly.

"Say, Tubby, this is no joking matter," protested Merritt.

"I'm not joking. Never more serious in my life. A coyote would make a fine scout."

"Yes, to run away," laughed Rob. "But seriously, Harry, could we get enough fellows out here to form a patrol?"

"Sure; I know of a dozen who would join. We could make it a mounted division, and maybe we could help Mr. Mayberry round up his Moquis."

"Say, fellows!" exclaimed Rob, with shining face, "that would be splendid!"

"Maybe we'd get our money back then," grunted Tubby.

"Tell you what we'll do," said Harry. "To-morrow I'll take you with me, Rob, and we'll ride round all the ranches where I know some boys, and get them to sign up. We ought to have a patrol organized in a week at that rate."

"Put me in as a commissariat officer, will you?" asked Tubby.

"That goes without saying," laughed Rob.

As the wagon jolted on over the road, which grew rapidly rougher and rougher, the boys eagerly discussed their great plan.

The foothills were now passed, and they were forging ahead through a deep cañon, or gorge, well wooded on its rugged sides with dark trees and shrubs. Here and there great patches of slablike rock cropped through the soil and showed nakedly among the vegetation. All at once Rob gave a shout and pointed up the hillside at one of these "islands" of rock.

"Look, look!" he shouted. "Something moved up there."

"Something moved," echoed the rest, Indians being the "something" uppermost in every mind.

"Indians?" gasped Tubby.

"No; at least, I don't think so. It was some animal – a huge beast, it seemed to be."

As he spoke there came a crashing of brush far up on the hillside, and every one in the party, even the sleepy Jose, gave vent to a perfect yell of amazement. On one of the rock shelves far above them was poised the massive form of an immense bear. His huge body showed blackly against the sunset-reddened shelf on which he stood. With the exception of one spot of white on his great chest, he was almost black.

"Silver Tip!" shouted Harry Harkness, too excited even to remember his rifle, which lay in the bottom of the wagon.

As he uttered the exclamation, the great ragged brute gave a snort of apparent disdain and clumsily lumbered off into the darker shadows. The next instant he was gone.

CHAPTER V. AT THE HARKNESS RANCH

"Silver Tip!" echoed Rob, as the immense monarch of the Arizona forest crashed his way off through the undergrowth. "Well, when you told us about him on the steamer, you didn't exaggerate his size. He's as big as a pony."

"Plenty of bear steaks on him," remarked Tubby judiciously.

"I guess you'd find them well seasoned with lead," laughed Harry. "Every hunter in this part of the country has shot at Silver Tip, and plenty of them have hit him, but he always managed to get away. The Indians and the Mexicans are scared of him. They think he is not a bear at all, but some sort of demon in animal form. Eh, Jose?"

"Silvree Teep mucho malo bear," grunted the Mexican. "Only can kill with silver bullet."

"What do you think of that," laughed Harry. "But our hunters have wasted too many lead bullets on old Silver Tip to try him with silver ones. But in spite of his wonderful good fortune hitherto, that bear's day will come."

"Like a dog's," commented Tubby. "You know they say every dog has his day – I guess it's the same way with that old sockdolliger."

"That's so, I guess," rejoined Harry.

Soon afterward they clattered and rumbled down a steep grade leading from the cañon into a wooded, green dip in the foothills. Before them suddenly spread out the vista of apparently illimitable pasture grounds, dotted with feeding cattle. In the foreground, half hidden by big cotton-wood trees, and overtopped by a windmill and water tank, stood a long, low ranch house, with numerous outbuildings and corrals about it.

"That's the range," said Harry, pointing. And as the boys broke into an admiring chorus, the mules plunged forward into a brisk trot. In a short time the outer gate was reached, and opened by dint of pulling a hanging contrivance which worked on a system of levers, that opened and closed the gate at the will of whoever was entering or leaving, without obliging them to dismount.

Around the bunkhouse stood a group of cowboys in leather chapareros and rough blue shirts, awaiting the call to supper in the low, red-painted cook-house. Some of them were gathered about a tin basin, removing the grime of the day. In a large corral were their ponies, browsing on a railed-off stack of grain hay, and occasionally kicking and biting and squealing, as some fractious soul among them instigated a fight.

Suddenly a door in the ranch house opened, and a figure, which the boys recognized as that of Mr. Harkness, emerged. His hands were extended in a hearty welcome, and a smile wreathed his bronzed features.

"Hulloa, boys!" he hailed. "Welcome to the Harkness ranch."

The boys broke into a cheer, and leaping from the wagon, ran forward to greet their kind-hearted host, whom they had last met on the deck of a stranded steamer on the Long Island shoals.

After the first chorus of greetings and questions had passed, Mr. Harkness inquired what had delayed them.

"Indians," rejoined Harry. "They tried to steal mules going down, and they robbed the boys here of their small change on their way up."

The face of the rancher grew graver.

In response to his questions, Rob had soon placed him in possession of the facts surrounding the appearance of the Moquis at the water hole and the subsequent events.

"We shall have to keep a sharp eye on the cattle, then," he said soberly. "I've got a bunch over on the far range, right up in the foothills. If these gentry get hungry they are likely to make a raid on them, or they may even do it out of pure wantonness."

"Yes, it wouldn't be the first time," said Harry. "By the way, pop, we met Mr. Mayberry, the Indian agent, on the way up. He's after them."

"That's bad," gravely commented the rancher.

"Bad!" repeated Harry. "Why, dad, I've heard you yourself say that he was the best Indian agent you ever knew."

"So he is, in a sense. But he is too kind-hearted. What those renegade rascals need is a file of soldiers with fixed bayonets and a burning desire to use them. However, come in, boys. Jose, wake up and put those trunks off. Get two men to help you bring them into the house. Come in, boys, and make yourselves at home in a rancher's shanty."

Mr. Harkness may have called it a shanty, but to the boys' eyes there had seldom been presented a more attractive interior than that of the Harkness ranch house. The furniture was dark and heavy, and the walls were hung with trophies of the hunt. Bright-colored Navajo rugs were all about, lending a brilliant dash of brightness to the dark woods and walls. At one end of the room was a huge open fireplace, which was now filled with fresh green boughs.

"Why – why, it's great!" exclaimed Rob, glancing about him admiringly.

"Glad you like it," said the rancher, evidently well pleased at the boy's pleasure. "Those heads there are all the tale of my rifle."

"The collection is only lacking in one thing – a single item," commented Rob.

"Which is – "

"The head of Silver Tip, the giant grizzly."

"You know about him, then?" Mr. Harkness seemed much surprised. At the time of his leaving the stranded ship he had not overheard the conversation between his son and the Boy Scouts.

"We've seen him," put in Tubby, nodding his head very sagely.

Then of course the story of their glimpse of the monster had to come out.

"It is unusual for Silver Tip to be about here at this time of year," commented Mr. Harkness. "He usually does not visit us till later. That's an additional peril to the cattle."

"How is that?" inquired Rob.

"In two ways. In the first place, Silver Tip is what we call a rogue grizzly. He lives all alone, hunts by himself, and has nothing to do with any others of his kind. He is as cruel, wantonly so, as he is formidable. For instance, last winter he killed fifty or more head of steers just for the sheer love of killing. Then, too, he is dangerous in another way. It takes very little to stampede a band of cattle. I have seen them started by a jack-rabbit leaping up suddenly from the brush. The sight of such an appalling monster as Silver Tip would be sure to start them off. No, I certainly don't like to hear that he is about."

Not long after this remark the announcement of supper put an end to further discussion of Silver Tip and his ways. Then and there Rob determined in his own mind that, if it were possible, the skin of that inaccessible monster would journey East with him when he returned. Absurd as the idea seemed, of him, an Eastern boy, green in the ways of the West, winning such a trophy, still Rob could not help dwelling on it. After the meal Mr. Harkness left the house for the bunkhouse, to give some orders to the night-riding cow-punchers. The news of the near neighborhood of the Moquis had made him nervous and unsettled.

The evening passed away in further discussion among the boys of the proposed mounted patrol of Boy Scouts, and before they knew it, ten o'clock had arrived. Pretty well fatigued by the events of the day, they were not unwilling to seek their beds, which were situated in three small upper rooms, directly above the big main living room.

Rob was just dropping off into unconsciousness when he heard a clattering of hoofs outside. Somebody had ridden up to the ranch house at full speed.

"Who is it?" he heard asked in Mr. Harkness's voice.

"It's me – Pete Bell," an excited voice rejoined, evidently that of the horseman who had just arrived.

"Well, Pete, what is it?" inquired the voice of Mr. Harkness once more.

"Why, sir, you know I was one of the bunch you sent to the far pasture to-night."

"Yes, yes! Go on, man! What is it – the Indians?"

"No, sir, no Indians. But, sir, we've seen it again."

"What, that foolish ghost-story thing! Haven't you fellows got over harping on that yet?"

"It ain't imagination, Mr. Harkness, as you seem to think," Rob heard the cow-puncher protest. "I seen it with these eyes as plain as I see you now. It come out on the cliff where the old cave dwellings are, and we saw it wring its hands a few times and then vanish just like it's always done before."

"Nonsense, Pete," replied the hard-headed rancher. "I thought you knew better than to take stock in ghost stories."

"So I do, sir; but when you see the ghost itself, that's getting close to home."

"Well, get back to the pasture now, Pete, and I'll guarantee the ghost won't bother you any more. Come on, get some color in your face. You are chattering like a child."

"Won't you send somebody back with me, sir? That thing ought to be looked into."

"Nonsense! I wouldn't waste time, men or thought on such rubbish. If you get track of any Indians, let me know, but don't bother me with any ghost stories. Now be off!"

"Y-y-yes, sir," said the cow-puncher obediently, but Rob noted that his pony didn't travel back toward the far pasture as fast as it had come away from it.

"So," thought Rob to himself, "there are haunted cliff dwellings near here, as well as a rogue grizzly and a bunch of bad Indians. Well, it looks as if we had fallen into an ideal spot for Boy Scouts."

CHAPTER VI.

A BOY SCOUT "BRONCHO BUSTER."

The next morning before breakfast Rob recounted to his chums the conversation he had overheard the night before. The story of the ghost of the ancient cliff dwellings was, it appeared, no new thing on the Harkness ranch, which accounted for its owner's apathy in regard to it. Successive batches of cow-punchers doing duty in the far pasture at night professed to have seen the grisly object on its nightly rounds, but nobody had ever had the courage to investigate it.

After the morning meal had been dispatched, Mr. Harkness announced that he expected to be busied about the ranch for the morning.

"But, Harry, you take the boys down to the corral," he said, "and have one of the men catch up some horses for them. You boys know best the kind of stock you want, so I'll let you choose them."

The boys thanked him, and a few moments afterward he left the room. A short time later he galloped off to make a round of the different sections of the range and to prosecute inquiries about the renegade Moquis.

The corral was, as was usually the case, full of ponies of all colors and grades of disposition, from mild beasts to fiery, half-broken bronchos. As the boys neared the enclosure, a stout little cowboy in a huge hairy pair of "chaps" approached them, airily swinging a lariat. His eyes opened and shut as rapidly as a loose shutter slat in a breeze. Cowboys have nick-names for everybody. His was of course "Blinky."

"Good mornin', Master Harry. Want some cattle this a. m.?" he inquired.

"Yes, Blinky. Have you got some good ones caught up?"

"Why, yes, you can have White Eye, and what kind of stock does your friends fancy?"

There was a twinkle in Blinky's fidgety optics as he asked this, for the boys, although they had donned regular ranch clothes, still bore about them that mysterious air which marks a "tenderfoot," as if they bore a brand.

"How about you, Rob?" asked Harry, also smiling slightly. "Want a bronc, or something more on the rocking-horse style?"

Now, although Rob could ride fairly well, and both Tubby and Merritt had had some practice on horseback, none of the boys were what might be called rough riders. But something in Blinky's tone and Harry's covert smile aroused all Rob's fighting blood.

"Oh, I want something with some life in it," he said boldly.

"Um-hum! The same will do for me, but not *too* much life, if you please," chimed in Tubby, somewhat dubiously.

"Anything I don't need to use spurs on," ordered Merritt, following up the general spirit.

"All right, young fellers," said the cow-puncher, opening the corral gate. "Come on in while I catch 'em up for you."

The instant the rawhide began whirling about Blinky's head the ponies evidently realized that something was up, for they began a wild race round and round the corral, heads up and heels lashing out right and left. The three tenderfeet regarded this exhibition with some apprehension, but they were too game to say anything.

"I'll rope my own," said Harry, picking up a lariat which hung coiled over a snubbing post near the gate. The ranch boy stood by the post, leisurely whirling his rawhide and just keeping the loop open till a small bay pony, with a big patch of white round each eye, came plunging by with the rest of the stampede. The lariat suddenly became imbued with life. Faster it whirled and faster, the loop finally sailing through the air gracefully and landing in a rawhide necklace round White Eye's neck.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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